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SANGAREE

FRANK G. SLAUGHTER

Author of "The Scarlet Cord" and "Divine Mistress"

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The characters and the incidents in this book
are entirely the product of the author's imagination
and have no relation to any person or event in real life.

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ONE THE FORT

FOR one moment more he stood at his makeshift operating table, with the scalpel nested in his palm The steel (winking in the massed candlelight like a cold slitted eye) seemed to mock his indecision tonight. It was, after all, a familiar moment of panic—a moment when he wished, with all his heart, that he had never elected to follow the surgeon's trade, in peace or in war.

Again the boy on the table gave a strangled scream· but Dr Tobias Kent was inured to screams His free hand was gentle at the patient's shoulder, as through the fog of morphia, he whispered him into silence. This lobsterback would need all his strength (and all the oxygen that remained in those wildly pumping lungs) if he was to live through the next quarter hour. Toby had made up his mind to operate, regardless of the chances This was no time to consider the fate that had brought a fresh-cheeked youth through six years of rebel-chasing in America—only to strike him down in the shadow of America's flag, months after the rebels had triumphed.

Malignant sore throat, resulting in a membrane occluding most of the pharynx Putrid sore throat, in the soldier's dictionary He had made the entry in his diary when he accepted their erstwhile enemy in the sickbay of Fort Washington Only an hour before, when the crisis came, the report had gone to the British outpost that faced them across the snow-sculptured ice of the Vermont lake

His eye swept the circle, resting briefly on the great corded arms of the two surgeon's mates, anchored, like living vises, at the patient's knees and shoulders, at his assistant's buckskin knee, planted firmly beneath the patient's neck, at the tall Negro, silhouetted against the candles massed in a dozen fists, tranquilly whittling a turkey quill . . Those same mates had worked beside him since he had joined Gates's Army at Saratoga. Roy Darby, his assistant, had taken his degree beside him at Edinburgh. Billy, the black freedman had ministered to both their needs during those student years Billy had followed them to the war, as a matter of course . So much for a team that functioned as a unit, without words

Dr Tobias Kent bowed to each in turn as his knife outlined the operative area on the patient's straining windpipe

He bowed to their former enemy last of all The British officers, observing protocol rigidly, still stood at dress parade along the clay-chinked wall, the candlelight, striking brightness from collar tabs and polished buttons, was kind to their splendor The candles softened the scarlet coats to the color of a robin's breast, muted the enormous white revers to a warm ivory Even the ruddy evidences of good feeding did not contrast too bitterly with the gaunt shapes of the Americans about the table Balancing the scalpel between thumb and forefinger, Dr Kent reflected that this was a gathering out of all proportion to its cause So much for the boredom of winter quarters, on both sides of a brand-new border—and the unexpected bit of drama that had sparked the iron-cold evening

"If milord pleases, may I begin?"

"Your fame has outdistanced you, Dr. Kent The patient is yours"

Toby had spoken without conscious irony—and Lord Wystan, the senior surgeon from the fort across the border, had answered in kind Brothers of the healing knife had crossed many such borders, with mutual good will, since the war had been joined Meeting Wystan's eyes, Toby felt his own confidence returning in a heartwarming rush.

"Since there's no other way——"

"Proceed, sir I've endorsed your diagnosis"

Dr. Tobias Kent, accepting the compliment in silence, let the knife bite home The first short, slashing incision proceeded to a hair's line of the indicated area, exposing the pharynx in a quick seeping of blood The boy under the steel howled again—a long, choked wail that died abruptly.

Wystan said calmly enough, "Jack's a good orderly, Doctor. I hardly thought he'd faint so quickly."

The knife moved on Toby, watching it do its work with no conscious message from his brain, spoke just as calmly. "He's a strong young ox, milord. If we can admit the air, we've a chance to save him"

Usually his concentration was absolute in these moments. He felt the need to talk tonight—a need that outdistanced the risk he was taking "Fabricius described this operation more than a century ago The ancients performed it, to relieve such malignant swellings as these They called it tracheòtomy——"

His fingers shifted as he spoke, pressing hard to control superficial bleeders Deep in the wound the bony prominence of the laryngeal cartilage now lay bare, a series of gleaming

white rings The boy's neck pumped like an anguished bellows; the scalpel indicated, and avoided, the great, pulsing arc of the carotid artery, the twin throbbings of the jugulars, as they filled and emptied in tempo with the laboring heart.

It was no time to admit that he would make his entry blind—trusting to an exact knowledge of anatomy to pierce the trachea at a safe, if casually chosen, spot

"Putrid sore throat," said Wystan, "is nearly always fatal. When the membrane blocks the passage within——"

"Tonight we shall bypass that membrane"

Toby leaned forward sharply with the words, and the whole room seemed to crane its neck in unison The boy on that scrubbed oaken surface, limp as a doll in the grip of the two mates, had almost ceased to writhe The bluish tint that had spread from lips to cheek told its own cruel story as graphically as the sudden ending of those rasping breaths. With cloture of the windpipe, death stared them down coldly and dared the knife to banish it.

Toby said only, "The quill, if you please, Billy"

Black fingers met white as the turkey quill dropped into Toby's free palm The scalpel moved with the speed of light, denting the cartilage of the trachea as it gave beneath the blade, flattening itself as one might flatten a tube between the fingers The steel bit through the softer gristle beneath, dipped to the tubular passage of the windpipe itself The first bubble showed almost instantly in the thin layer of blood obscuring the depths of the wound. A second more, and air whistled through the narrow opening—a high-pitched sound, oddly like a child's first wailing

"In time's nick, if milord will forgive the word play. Observe how simply one provides a temporary windpipe"

The steel had already bisected another cartilage, widening the opening so that air could flow through unimpeded Without glancing up Toby knew that the British surgeon's eyes had opened wide, even before the turkey quill could be slotted home. The opening, gauged to a fraction snapped shut around the tube; the bleeding, controlled by tight compresses, had already diminished to a negligible ooze Once again—and he made his judgment solemnly as he set the last dressing and stepped away from the table—a blend of luck and knowledge had saved a life

"Observe how the cyanosis has diminished——"

A murmur filled the room as the Britishers moved forward to a man The boy on the table was breathing almost normally now, thanks to his improvised windpipe In another week—and again Toby made his judgment with pious reservations—that strong young body might well carry its own

battle with an affliction that was, after all, localized Youth and good yeoman blood would do the rest—thanks to the daring of a rebel surgeon in a snowbound corner of the wilderness

"The patient is yours, gentlemen"

It was Lord Wystan's turn to bow Scrubbing at a basin on the side table, Toby kept his eyes lowered as he accepted the murmur of applause from the Briton's brother officers.

"Of course you gentlemen are welcome to leave him in our sick bay until the crisis is past May we offer you bear steak for dinner?"

Heels clicked in unison Toby waved back the candle-bearers as Billy carried the patient out, as easily as an over-sized child Shrugging into his uniform coat, he found that he could return Wystan's smile Both garrisons knew that the orderly had been sent to Fort Washington to bargain for those same bear steaks just before his collapse

"Steak for rum, I believe," said the Briton. "We brought the rum across the ice by pack sled Six demijohns of Jamaica Will you and your staff join us in a toddy?"

"When I've entered the case in my journal"

The whole circle was smiling, now that the cause of its tension had vanished Toby made a real effort to join in—to cast off the malaise that had oppressed him so long Barter of this sort had kept both garrisons well fed during the long winter. Surely it was good to be reminded that the war had ended—though the hated scarlet coats of their old enemies still gleamed like fresh blood in the candlelight

In the doorway that gave to his own quarters Toby raised one hand, palm outward—the traditional gesture of peace, older than uniforms or armies He was still forcing a smile when the door creaked shut behind him, though he realized, one more time, that his own private war could never end so easily

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As quarters went, his shakedown in this corner of the blockhouse was more than adequate The corn-shuck bed and its stack of quilts were both blessedly free of lice Almost no wind could find its way between the well-chinked logs The fire, dancing on the open fieldstone hearth, made the cramped room as cheery as most bachelors' corners at the wrong end of a war

As a small added miracle there was glass at the one narrow window—it had formerly served as a gun port—that faced northwest across the lake Billy had made a special

voyage to Burlington to buy, or steal, that precious pane. Remembering the hours he had sat at this same gun port, to watch winter claim the gray-blue waste of water as its own, Toby settled in the casement and stared once again at Canada—white under a high moon, and desolate as the moon's own face

Canada stared back at him blankly in the night. The clear-etched bulk of Fort Cornwallis—the British equivalent of their own blockhouse that stood foursquare across the glare ice—seemed part of that granite outcrop on the hill.

Fort Cornwallis, Fort Washington Both titles had been coined in tired soldiers' brains These facing blockhouses were mere specks on the checkerboard of war, too unimportant now to deserve a name Abandoned years ago, when the fighting shifted to the south, their own fort had been a den of foxes when Toby's regiment slogged their longboats through the rain to camp within its walls Now it was their final winter quarters, while they faced their old enemy in the last dull months of the armed truce and waited for open water on Champlain

An ambitious young surgeon, whose ambitions had been steel-bright not too long ago, had settled easily enough into an ennui that was at times all but identical with contentment Or was contentment the wrong word for the limbo he had inhabited so long?

A man whose destiny had solved itself, so far, had small cause to complain if that same destiny had boxed him rather tightly, on occasion War, of course, had been the tightest box of all, and yet the war had given him every chance to round out his surgery He had marched in the vanguard of the actions centering on Champlain—and with Washington, from the Forge to Monmouth He had worked endless hours in the hospital wards at Albany, where the legend of his surgical team had established itself firmly It was hardly his fault that he recalled the war in snatches

At least he had not considered the American Revolution as a stage setting to display his skill, though it had served that precise purpose no less than Edinburgh His contribution to the cause had been no less valuable, though his first commission in the Continental Army and the honors that followed had been arranged by another's hand

He had felt no twinge of conscience when General Victor Darby purchased a captain's commission for him in Philadelphia. Old Victor's motives had been of the highest When he selected a protégé, he did a thorough job on that protégé's future Dr Clemens, the upcountry sawbones who carried his tools in his saddlebags, had been another part of

Victor's planning So had Victor's own son Roy, and the years of study they had shared Now, as the final episode in that planning, they had come here for orders Here, to a snowbound fort, in the heart of a winter wilderness

He shrugged off the chill overtones of that image and turned back to his fire, to light his desk candle from the hearth Billy had left a stack of fresh quills beside the ink-pot, his diary lay open under the chunk of wampum he used as a paperweight Moving the wampum aside, he glanced through the entry he had made only that afternoon The curlicues of his schoolboy hand were flawless Even those curlicues had been Victor Darby's gift

> March 2, 1784
>
> V D 's condition unchanged Plethora, if anything, even more pronounced Established drainage with skin incisions, and Bled at noon But Dropsical Condition seems hopeless Skin of Abdomen drum-tight Joints of Arms and Legs swollen beyond articulation His Heart will scarcely last the Night.

Toby stared at the entry until the writing danced under his eyes Usually, his notes were far less curt, even now, as he entered the tracheotomy he had just performed, he watched his pen warm to his work as he embellished the clinical picture with comments of his own There was no footnote to add to death, when death was inescapable No doctor could blink the fact that General Victor Darby was dying—in a land as alien from his native Georgia as the wastes of some unknown planet

Toby lifted his eyes from the page as the wind died outside, even with the thick pine floor between he could hear the other pen scratching away in the room just below. The whole fort knew that its commandant was dictating his will to Sam Hoyt, his head overseer, who had been summoned from Georgia when the regiment entered its final winter quarters Roy and Toby had hastened northward, from hospital detail in Albany, for the same reason They had known why Old Victor was putting his house in order.

Revised and re-drafted a dozen times, the general's will had been excuse enough for the general to go on living as autumn merged with the first snow of the Vermont winter.

It had been typical of Victor Darby to stay with his command Any of his aides could have handled the thankless minutiae of this last bivouac, the general himself, resting on well-earned honors, could have laid down his sword in his native state, composed his final testament in a kinder air But the regiment had maintained its identity, in skeleton cadre, while the fighters yielded to the diplomats. Now

that the treaty was signed and sealed in Paris, Darby's famous Raiders still awaited a definite order to disband. Officers and men, living as they had never lived in the field, continued to stump the ramparts of Fort Washington, to maneuver on the glare ice, and, eying their old enemy a bit wistfully across the great frozen bay, to await a storming order that would never come.

Old Victor, committing his credo to parchment, had maintained his familiar discipline from his sickbed The man who had raised his first company at his own expense, in the bottomlands of the Savannah River—and ferried that same company North for special orders from the commanding general—would die as he had lived There was a medallion quality about General Darby, an authentic greatness that would outlast his time

The general's chief surgeon—who was also a veteran of that first daredevil company—leafed his diary at random, to bring back a vignette that would be with him always.

> September 29, 1777
>
> Camp'd this morning on the shores of Missisquoi Bay, awaiting our General's Longboats Camp'd under Canvas, in a Blue-Spruce Grove It was high above the Swamps of this desolate Region—and a welcome Protection against Flies, which are Curs'd Late this Yr We were quite ready for the Wounded, when Darby's Raiders returned from the Business across the Water . . .

Darby's Raiders had advertised their business that afternoon long before they burst into view out of the unseasonable heat mirage on that vast northern bay. Driven by wildly spouting oars, and singing as they came, they seemed to trail streams from the fire that roared on the far shore. The billowing of that pyre—tall as a cloud in the blue—told of the successful strike at Burgoyne's supply depot, where Missisquoi Bay joined Lake Champlain. Darby's own roar, from the leading boat, had brought his surgeons on the run, surrounded by the babble of their walking wounded

They had broken camp with minutes to spare, and ghosted into the green silence of the swamps as evening fell, hoodwinking the enemy's Indian scouts He had saved a man's arm that afternoon, excising bone fragments as the patient lay in a bouncing longboat, and daring to leave the wound in an open splint, to heal in fresh air He had saved a broken skull—and more bleeders than he could remember. Probe and splint with quick, sure knowledge Knife men's flesh without mercy, that it may grow whole again. The general's surgeons had learned to operate on the run, or per-

ish General Darby's own protégé had always set the pace.

Once again Toby asked himself why the memory of that shared adventure brought no rise in spirits now. Or why a fancy-free young doctor, who had come through a long war with no marks save a tendency to scream in his sleep now and again, should stare at his diary with positive distaste. Quite as though that rough-sewn foolscap were a millstone, anchoring him forever in the past.

Certainly this winter marked the end of orders, so far as the Continental Army was concerned Certainly he owed nothing to Victor Darby, now that Old Victor was dying

Riffling those hand-cut foolscap leaves, he brought memory back with the terse entries, with no attempt at sequence

Cannon gnawing at a Jersey peach orchard, where blue-white figures had flanked a scarlet line They had operated under fire that day in Monmouth Court House . . .

Bone-searing cold at the Forge, and the tall, cloaked figure of the commanding general, sharp as a statue against the sky as his tired troops poured past in review. That winter his scalpel had worked more often at frostbitten toes. The surgeon's bloodletting could never match the blood in the snow . . .

The hot, green stink of the wards at Albany, where the wreckage of war still overflowed to warehouse and side-street parlors. Where death rioted in bubbling lungs, in amputation stumps black with gangrene. . . .

Albany, Monmouth, a fateful Pennsylvania bivouac—and now, this final encampment, deep in the brand-new Commonwealth of Vermont It no longer seemed odd that a back-country Georgian should follow a revolutionary army into almost every corner but his own. Or that Roy should follow, too, like a patient shadow—Roy Darby, the scholar born, who belonged with his books and his rather absurd microscope He could even face up to the fact that Old Victor himself was breathing his last.

The general had dismissed that fact as superfluous as they talked across the footboard of his four-poster—a genuine Hepplewhite, brought to the fort in sections to make the commandant's last days more bearable.

"I'll go gladly, Toby Why not? We've won our war. I've done my work as well as I was able. You and Roy must see it through"

"*Your* work, General?"

Victor had taken his time with his answer Toby could still feel the probe of his eyes, the questions in the brain behind.

"And why not? You've both been trained for it. Well-trained, if I may say that much for my intentions."

"You had me trained in medicine, sir—along with Roy. Not to manage the Darby estates——"

But the general had ignored his surgeon captain's interruption. "It won't be easy work to pick up—I'll grant you that. Most of our planters are ruined; the ones who survived won't admit the need of a fresh start. As for the Darby holdings—well, Nancy has done her best to keep them together. But Nancy's only a woman, even though she is my daughter."

"In that case, General, I'd trust her anywhere."

Victor Darby had gone on as though he had not heard. "There's hard money to spare, thank God. Sam Hoyt saw to that, when he ghosted my ships into Boston in '78, without losing a spar. Yes, and skippered 'em with Yankee captains worth their weight in sterling. I still can't believe what those ships earned as privateers. But you will, my boy. Sam has entered it on the books to the last shilling."

The general's pride, reflected Toby, had been more than justified. A Georgia patrician, who had always shipped his own tobacco and rice direct from his own docks in Savannah, Old Victor had read the warnings in time. He had slipped his cables years before the British could overrun the South. Working out of Boston, those fast-sailing brigs had earned more than enough to repair his ravaged acres.

"Roy should profit by your wisdom, General. Roy, his wife, his sister——"

"I trust they shall, with time. But Roy's a dreamer, not a doer. His wife's a vixen who needs a bridle badly. My daughter's another type of vixen, I'm afraid. *She's* never even heard of bridles." Old Victor had chuckled in the depths of his crazy quilts. "So you see, Toby, if they're to produce again, the Darby acres need a *manager*. And I can't underline the word too strongly."

"If you're suggesting that I——"

"I'm not suggesting, my boy. I'm explaining why I trained you."

"For medicine, General!"

"For medicine—and for this."

"But you've a manager now."

Again the huge bed shook under Victor Darby's chuckle. The laughter should have been grotesque—issuing from dying lungs. It was full-bodied as life itself, and quite as careless of tomorrow.

"If you mean Sam Hoyt, I must contradict you firmly.

Sam's a doer right enough. In fact, Sam's a good century ahead of his times."

"I've heard them say as much of you, General."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Toby As it happens, a man of my resources can indulge in a little forward-looking philosophy without being called anything worse than a fool. I shot just three friends before '76, because I insisted that men are born equal, now Mr Jefferson sustains me—which only means that I broke three good Tory collarbones in vain But Sam Hoyt's another story Sam was over his ears in debt when I rescued him. He'd be over his ears today if our Revolution hadn't killed off most of his creditors. He's a good man, Toby, but he can't balance books. He can only take orders"

"Not from me, sir"

"Who else can see that they're obeyed?"

"Will you make your meaning clear, General?"

"Let me complete my will I'll explain it tonight."

Again Victor Darby had waved aside objections in advance "Don't favor me with your professional frown, Dr. Kent I'll live until midnight—word of honor"

There had been no time for more The general had dozed with that dismissal, and his captain surgeon had clicked his heels and departed, to inspect the cases in sick bay, to check their meat locker, to save another life on the mess-room table. But he had carried the unspoken command deep in his brain He would have little choice, when that command was issued In uniform and out he had obeyed Victor Darby too long to question his wisdom now.

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The drone of voices subsided for a moment in the mess-room beyond his door. In the lull Toby could hear the labored breathing from the room below. Just as clearly he distinguished Old Victor's ringing baritone, as their commander, ignoring such trifles as collapsing lungs, resumed his dictation

I should be downstairs, thought Toby. *Even if nothing can help him now.* But inertia still held him prisoner, though he was pacing his own narrow quarters now, in tempo with the booming voice below

Thanks to Billy's well-banked fire, the senior surgeon's quarters were comfortably warm tonight. More than comfortable for a veteran, Toby added—and flung his coat at the nearest wall peg The garment coasted in mid-air like an agile bird, and landed in its usual resting place, after six years

of uniforms, it was only natural that one's dress coat should drop into ranks, precise as an officer on parade. He stared moodily at that row of glossy regimentals; his gold-piped tricorne with its brand-new cockade, the greatcoat with its magnificent sable ruff, the file of mirror-bright boots Unlike so many tattered heroes in this fight for a better world, Darby's Raiders had lived well between campaigns. The general's personal war chest had seen to that—just as the general's hard money kept the flintlocks primed.

Thanks to Old Victor's largesse, Toby's surgery had seldom wanted for supplies his sick bay had always been stocked when the regiment retired to lick its wounds Even such unobtainables as bleeding cups and Paris-forged scalpels had come into his hands with ease Old Victor had only shrugged when his surgeon had questioned the cost Like all true idealists, Victor Darby was careless of costs when true social change was in the making.

Toby's own affairs, including his career to date, had proceeded at the same brisk pace. The progression—from back-country youth to front-line surgeon in a famous regiment —had been planned, as deliberately as General Darby planned most of his ventures The general had enjoyed his own quiet pride that it had succeeded so completely

Looking back on that progression now, Toby felt his tension ease. The diary on his desk was no longer an enemy, but a possible guide to his future. He settled in his armchair and began to read with care. After all, there might be no later chance to reappraise his past—to uncover the precise moment when he had bound himself to the Darby fortunes.

The official date, of course, was easy to pin down The day he first met Victor Darby in the flesh—in the chalk-dust aura of the schoolhouse at Clay Creek . . .

He let the smell return to him first of all—a smell based on that same chalk dust which seemed, in memory's eye, to hang like dry, white pollen in the air, mingling with unwashed backwoods pelts, the acrid aroma of dead blossoms on the China tree just beyond the door, palmettoes dry as dead fans in the winter drought, broom-covered bottom land heavy with sun-drenched languor. And then the gaunt, clay-chinked room with its rough blackboard and rougher benches. The awful majesty of the dais, where the local pedagogue sat throned behind his file of calf-bound classics . . . But another teacher had replaced Mr. Williams today. The newcomer was tall, and garbed in gray, he had flashing blue eyes and a head that reminded you of Mr Williams's bust of Plato, minus Plato's improbable whiskers This teacher was surely a gentleman, from his bright steel shoe buckles to his neatly

clubbed hair, which was tied in the first silken knot that Toby Kent had ever seen. He did not mock your back-country burr, as Mr. Williams so often did, but listened with grave attention as you stumbled through the Plantagenet kings you'd had by heart that morning. Only this wasn't a teacher at all —or so the whisper ran at recess time. This was none other than Victor Darby himself, the monarch in everything but name of all this richly timbered upland.

Toby had absorbed too many legends of Victor Darby to doubt that he existed—though the man himself had always seemed remote as a god He did not scout the rumor—when Gabriel Thatch sent it flying across the hard-packed clay of the play yard—though he told himself that Gabe was romancing, as usual. Surely a man of that stature would never take over the morning classes in the Clay Creek school. Even if it was true that Darby pounds had raised this schoolhouse roof and paid the teacher's salary. Even if Darby overseers insisted that each child in their district, until he had turned fourteen, attend those schoolhouses.

Gabriel had added to the picture He had said that Victor Darby toured his back-country domain each spring, to check on work in progress—especially on the education of the young. That the great man from Savannah had a kind word for everyone, whether bondsman or tenant farmer. Even for the blacks sweating in his lumber camps—or planting his tobacco farms down river. Even the blacks, said Gabriel, were permitted to work out their freedom under the Darby grants.

"Whoever saw a *free* blackfellow?"

"There's a good twenty of 'em now at Darbyville. He'd free still more, if the law would let him."

"You're lying, Gabe!"

Young Thatch had cuffed him soundly then, and they had wrestled for a while there in the red dust of the school yard—like young bobcats who enjoyed fighting for its own sake. But that was memory within memory; he had been only nine when Gabe had spun those incredible fantasies Now that he was crowding fifteen, with a man's half-formed longings, he could afford to smile tolerantly—and throw a wink at Martha Gillespie—when his best friend repeated the fantasy once again. He could even walk back to the schoolhouse porch, with a fine show of nonchalance, when Mr. Williams summoned him from the doorway

Victor Darby was still in the pedagogue's chair, thumbing the report book. When he looked up at the tall, gangling boy before him his smile and voice, so vibrant, yet so gentle, seemed to come from another, finer world.

"Sit down, Tobias Let me have a look at you"

Toby came a step nearer, losing awkwardness in that single stride He found that he could settle in the facing chair as though he had known Victor Darby always, stare into those flashing blue eyes as if their dancing good-humor were an echo of his own.

"Mr. Williams tells me that you've been his honor student from the beginning."

Toby caught old Williams's grimace in the background, and dared to shake his head True, he had led his class in mathematics and history. Gabriel Thatch, at times, had outdistanced him in the latter subject, and always in spelling and logic. He said as much now, his eyes unwavering

"If I had more time, sir—that is, if I *took* more time——"

The handsome brows across the desk knitted in a truly Jovian frown. Despite the spectacles riding on that fine forehead, the frilled stock at the base of the cleft chin, Victor Darby resembled Plato more than ever.

"You're one of a large household, I know. Have the chores kept you from your schooling?"

"No sir My—my guardian understands. All of us are to be educated" Toby spoke the words in a whisper. It was a kind of local miracle that Darby tenants could send their young to the schoolhouse seven months in every year, while Yancy bondsmen, in the next valley, could hardly trace their names.

Old Williams spoke, a dry-as-dust whisper in the background, "It's his specimens, sir. Or, should we say, his dissections? You'll find it all there in the record."

"It is noted," said Victor Darby

"As you know, sir, I dabbled a bit in the sciences before you sent me here I saw no harm in helping the boy."

"No harm at all," said Victor Darby. "I'm delighted to find a—shall I say, a spark of true science this deep in Georgia?"

The schoolmaster flushed "Already he's worked through the Arthropoda. Next week he begins on Pisces."

"Why not on Homo sapiens as well?"

"Your pardon?"

But Victor Darby's eyes and voice were all for Toby now. "Let me see your hands, my boy Spread 'em on the desk—so. It's as I hoped, Williams Finger ends like steel springs. How'd you like to be a surgeon, Toby Kent?"

The question was thrown abruptly, though Toby guessed, even then, that Darby's wise eyes had weighed him from the start, and guessed his answer in advance. That his next words were only a sop to the vanity of youth

"Sleep on it, if you wish. I don't blame you for being sur-

prised—perhaps even shocked. The fact is, I'm sending my son upriver this fall to study here——"

"With Mr Williams?"

"Why not? I'll apprentice him later to Dr Clemens, in Augusta You could begin together, if it's agreeable" Victor Darby smiled gently as Toby tried to speak "Sleep on it, Toby, we'll talk again tomorrow At least I hope you'll like Roy He's been gently reared so far, but he's an American at heart He could use a friend like you"

So far the words had poured out in a flood that enclosed the boy warmly Accept me as your equal, said Darby's dancing blue eyes Forget that I own the land you work, that I bought most of you in the English market place, as easily as other men buy Negroes Remember, instead, how fast I set you free—all of you—the moment you could earn your way Remember, above all, that you are still master of your fate, even if you accept my help

"Would you consider being a doctor, Toby?"

"I'd be honored, sir But my—my guardian——"

He hesitated on that word, seeing the figure of Angus MacLane etched in brimstone, watching his black maw open for its familiar bellow Angus was a good man, a just man, he had given his orphan charge a home—and he expected gratitude in return Gratitude, to Angus, was all the work a growing boy could handle between dawn and dusk—with time out, not too grudgingly, for Mr Williams's school Angus's tolerance did not include Mr Williams's extra instruction in science Toby could still hear the Scot's last burst of cursing at the folly of such subjects as zoology and dissection.

Strong hands like Toby's, said Toby's guardian, should ride their end of the whipsaw in the logging camp What would he say to Victor Darby's incredible offer?

But Victor Darby brushed that question aside quite casually. "I've just bought up your articles And I've paid Angus a round sum besides, for the hours he's lost through your woolgathering"

The man's eyes were compelling, almost hypnotic like twin blue suns, they radiated a charm all their own Yes, that was the precise moment he had sealed his compact with the Darbys

"We wouldn't call it woolgathering, Toby. We'd call it the future"

"The future, sir?"

"If Clemens gives you a certificate, I'll send you to Edinburgh" Victor Darby held out his hand—an aristocrat's hand, long and pale, with unsuspected strength in the finger-

tips. "I think that's all I care to say now When you go out, will you send in a classmate named Gabriel Thatch—the one who surpasses you in logic?"

iv

It had begun as simply as that—and as magically. . . .

Gabriel, too, had been articled to the Darby estate that spring, with the understanding that he was to go to Savannah in the fall, to learn the printer's trade Victor Darby had only followed his usual custom when he bestowed these opportunities Each spring he roamed among his upland schools, conning the masters' reports and selecting pupils for special honors. Or so Gabriel explained it, as he and Toby plotted their futures together; the fact did nothing to dim the luster of their planning Largesse such as this seemed only natural to a family that had put down its roots with Oglethorpe

In that half-century the Darbys had bought their way upriver, moving with steady purpose behind the pioneers' ax blades. They had bought virgin wilderness along with tidewater acres, rice islands in the Savannah estuary along with tobacco land Always they had pinned down their acres with stout yeoman hands. Men such as Angus MacLane, who had given Toby a hayrick home, of a sort, since Toby's own parents had died Men such as fat John Singleton, who had bought up his articles years before and now managed the ordinary at Clay Creek Always the Darbys had encouraged their bondsmen—imported to this latter-day paradise by the boatload, from London to the Clyde—to buy their freedom at the earliest moment, to better the fortunes of their young

Victor's own father had built the Darby house in Savannah. And it was Jonathan Darby who had laid the cornerstone of Sangaree, that even more magnificent dwelling that brooded, like a white archangel, above the Darby rice paddies near the river's mouth Unlike other landowners, Jonathan had sold his London holdings the day he made his first purchase from a Yamacraw chieftain—and moved his merchant fleet from the Pool to this wide, tan-red river in a recent wilderness Succeeding Darbys had merely planted their riches in the same red clay that nourished them.

But this was history, of a sort Yellowjack, sweeping the Savannah ten years before, had taken most of Victor's generation in its scythe, along with his wife and his older sons. Only Roy had been spared, along with his sister Nancy, and Nancy had become the family chatelaine thereafter, when Victor Darby announced he would never remarry. Along with the rest, this was mere chronology to Toby, as he waited

for his future to take shape there in the Georgia uplands. Victor himself was only a memory now, Victor's daughter seemed unreal as a lady in some knightly fable. When Roy came to study awhile at Mr. Williams's school, and to share Toby's quarters above Angus MacLane's barn, he did little to dispel that unreality, though Roy, in his own slight person, was just what Toby felt a tidewater nabob should be.

They were fast friends long before they began their apprenticeship with Dr. Clemens. For all his surface gravity, Roy could be coltish when inspired. Whisky in Augusta had been one such outlet—whisky, said Roy, was a drink for overseers, but he had taken his share, along with Toby and Gabriel. Camping under the stars was another—when they could avoid the wrath of Angus MacLane, who believed that boys, like livestock, should be penned after dark. Flirting with the doxies at John Singleton's ordinary had come naturally too—as naturally as a sub-rosa trip to the cellar with one of them, when the landlord turned an obliging back. Love-making, as Clay Creek understood that not-too-tender phrase, had always seemed logical as breathing to Toby Kent—thanks to Gabriel's tutelage.

Even the intrusion of Martha Gillespie could not spoil their friendship, though she altered its pattern for a while. Martha had always been Toby's neighbor, her father, who acted as the Darby factor at Clay Creek, held the free quarter section adjoining the MacLane land. Since the Gillespies were people of standing in the community, Toby had never quite dared to link Martha, in his secret dreams, with the barmaids at Singleton's ordinary, even when he discovered that she could more than match their kisses.

Their visit to Sachem Cave had been only an inevitable climax to that discovery. It had begun innocently enough, with a Sunday walk along the upland trail that wound down to the riverbank—until a summer rain squall had trapped them at the forest's edge, just below the bluff. Looking back on it later, he could wonder if she had planned to end their stroll at this precise spot, and whether she rejoiced inwardly when the first white hiss of the rain gave her a ready-made excuse to venture farther.

"We can just make the caves, Toby."

"We'll be soaked, now it's pelting down in earnest."

"Not if we run."

She had raced away from him on that, lifting the skirts of her Mother Hubbard to give freedom to her lithe flashing legs. When they plunged beneath the vine-laced overhang of the first cave's mouth, she had laughed aloud, and let herself lean back in his waiting arms.

Below them, the tan-brown Savannah was starred with the dancing pennies of the storm. A gray-white curtain of dampness, shrouding the far shore and the cliffs below, gave the weeping Georgia landscape an air both ghostly and warm If these are phantoms trailing their long fingers on the fringe of evening, thought Toby, they seem friendly enough. He spoke the thought aloud with his lips against Martha's hair, hardly conscious that he had spoken at all.

"Do you feel as though you're being watched?"

"Not at all," she said. "I feel prehistoric. Like Eve in search of Adam."

"Lilith suits you better," he said.

"Lilith, then. But how can we be watched, if we're the only people on earth?" She entered the cave on that, tossing him a laugh that—even to his green youth—could have but one meaning.

The sand under their feet was bone dry Kneeling at the rough stone hearth that he and Roy had built for last year's camping trip, Toby knew that there would be kindling and dry grass among the stones, awaiting the touch of his tinder gun. That the ocher-red warrior on the facing wall—painted by some primitive artist an eon ago—would grin, as always, in the first pulse of firelight. That Martha, drying her soaked homespun in the blaze, would match the enigma of that warrior's smile

"Why'd you bring me here, Toby?"

Deciding to be gallant a moment more, he did not remind her that she had suggested they sit today at the sachem's feet. "Are you sorry you came this far?"

"On the contrary. I've been wondering why you haven't invited me sooner."

Again her smile was an open invitation He pretended to be busy with the fire a moment more—letting her quit its orbit without touching her, letting her go to the cave's mouth to watch the rain squall beat up the valley The gray afternoon, shot with aqueous light, outlined her figure there in the tangle of wild grape. He felt his heart jump a beat as he noted the throb of her breasts under the Mother Hubbard, and guessed that those brave twin mounds were unconfined as Martha Gillespie herself.

"Don't you want to watch the storm, Toby?"

"You should dry yourself first."

"I'm quite dry underneath. And quite warm."

I'll make you come to me, he promised himself. Now that I'm sure of you Aloud, he said only, "A gray light becomes you, Martha You burn against it like a flame."

"Where did you learn that speech?"

He smiled at the thrust. "From Gabe, of course. And he stole it from a book I forget the poet's name."

Martha spoke with her eyes on the dancing rain "If you'll remember, I taught you to kiss properly not too long ago"

"I'm grateful for the instructions"

"And *I'm* glad you learned a few lessons from others. Such as compliments"

"Don't let it end there"

"And love-making, I hope." She had paused on the last words, letting it slip out like a challenge.

"Come to the fire," he said "That dress is still dripping."

"It'll be dry before we're done," said Martha

Even when she had whisked that ungainly garment from shoulders and thighs, even after he saw that she was, indeed, naked beneath it, he could not quite believe her They did not speak again as her lyre-sweet body, vibrating on a high note of ecstasy, claimed him for its own, engulfed him for a blind eternity that swallowed all his doubts.

v

There had been other visits to the cave that lazy summer, and each sojourn at the sachem's feet had been more satisfying than the last Toby was not too chagrined when he guessed that Martha had walked out with both Gabriel and Roy, for similar dalliance in the wilderness But when he heard that Roy meant to marry her in the fall, he could not quite believe his ears Or quite decide what his next move should be, when rumor solidified into fact, and Victor Darby himself arrived at the Creek to confer with the Gillespies on wedding plans.

By and large, Clay Creek had chortled at Martha's luck. Calling on Victor Darby, at the latter's request, Toby found that he could half-accept the spectacle of Roy as a young man in love—and a father that seemed all too eager to endorse the match He was no less surprised at his own growing hope that the marriage might prove a success, despite Martha's past.

"I sent my boy upriver for two reasons, Toby. First, he needed something more in life besides his books Second, and more important, I hoped he'd capture himself a bride in these woods"

"*Here*, sir?"

"Georgia was settled by people like the Kents and the Gillespies When our history is written, they'll get the credit for breaking this land The Darbys will be remembered, if at all, as the moneybags that grew fatter at your expense. Yes, I'm proud that Roy has chosen Martha"

"What of your daughter, sir?" Toby had just learned of

Nancy Darby's marriage to a tidewater nabob named Gregory He found that he had blurted the question, without conscious thought "Would you have wished that she——?" He drew back at Old Victor's frown.

"I had other plans for Nancy, my boy—plans I see no point in mentioning now. Someday, if you visit my library at Sangaree, it may amuse you to read those plans."

"You honor me too highly"

But Victor Darby seemed lost in thought now. "My friends have called me a philosopher without an audience At least I haven't bored them with my true thoughts—or, should I say, my hopes for my children, and for Georgia. You'll find those hopes recorded in my diaries Read them when you like" The seigneur of the Darbys emerged from his reverie "We were discussing my daughter, I believe—and not my hopes"

"Really, sir, I've no right to——"

"Nonsense I'm delighted at your interest Nancy has always taken her duties too seriously—or should I say her debt to Roy and myself? Marriage may help her to forget that sterile burden Granted her husband's a bit too conscious of his household gods"

"Should I be hearing this?"

"My views on the Gregorys are well-known It's a first-class royalist family—a bit too stiff-necked for comfort, but that's a common failing among our royalists George Gregory, as I say, is still an improvement over the life Nancy's been leading."

"I'm glad you're happy in the match, sir"

"The fact that I accept my son-in-law doesn't mean I'm happy." Again Victor Darby seemed to be thinking aloud. "Perhaps I did wrong—to keep Nancy in Georgia when her mother passed on Both she and Roy might have been happier as Englishmen than as colonials. Or as Americans." Old Victor had rolled the strange word on his tongue, as though savoring its overtone of rebellion "Be that as it may, the die is cast—for Roy, at least, I'm pinning my hopes on Martha and on you."

"On me, sir?"

"Roy has great faith in you, Toby And he's improved enormously since you've both worked with Clemens That's why I'm sending you to Edinburgh together"

"But if he's marrying——?"

"His bride-to-be insists he complete his studies She'll make his home for him outside the university"

It had been easy, after that pronouncement, to let events take their course. Easier still to avoid Savannah entirely the

week of Martha's wedding—as he had avoided Martha herself after the formal announcement He had come down to Charleston via the Carolina foothills and taken ship direct to Glasgow—and to Edinburgh. Obeying another common-sense instinct, he had rented rooms in a coaching inn on Charles Street, almost in the shadow of the university and the dampstone mass of its famous medical school.

He knew that Roy had taken a house in the Horse Wynd, where he entertained lavishly, as befitted a colonial nabob; he knew that Martha—dancing like a jeweled butterfly in this alien air—had taken on the colors of her environment instantly—making herself a lady overnight, even as she kept her own wilderness charm inviolate.

Yes, with his work as a potent antidote it had been simple enough to accept that metamorphosis—even to shrug off Roy's bewilderment that his old friend should dine with him so seldom Their work had absorbed them both from the first. Operating at the school's famous clinic, with the great John Hunter clocking the scalpel strokes, Toby knew that he had found his lifework, and the time to perfect his skill Roy, for his part, was becoming the perfect clinician, with each day of "hospital walking," each session in dispensary and laboratory. As a medical team, the two young doctors complemented each other—so completely, that the other gulf dividing them could be all but forgotten at times

They had taken their degrees with war rumbling at the edges of their world Letters already lay open on their desks, beside their brand-new sheepskin diplomas, warning them that the Darby shipping would move en bloc to Havana to sail out the storm When the shots fired at Lexington echoed across the Atlantic like the visible clap of doom, Toby was ordered to proceed at once to Philadelphia, where Victor Darby was preparing to offer a regiment of Georgia raiders to the Congress Roy would join them there, after he had transported Martha to a prepared haven in Cuba. Nancy Gregory, it seemed, had already sailed for Nassau, since her husband had elected to serve his king.

Roy and Toby, still obeying orders, planned to take separate ships from Clydebank Roaring out of his inn aboard the Glasgow Mail, Toby felt oddly content for a man about to plunge into the heart of a revolution. Thanks to his bachelor status, it had been easy to wrap himself in an extra greatcoat and take a box seat, leaving the interior of the coach to Roy and Martha Since their last afternoon in Sachem Cave he had managed to avoid being alone with Mrs Roy Darby, though it had cost an effort at times Surely there would be no time for extended farewells in Glasgow. Or so he had

reasoned, as they rolled across Scotland behind the thunder of sixteen hooves

Roy had been constantly occupied in Glasgow, assembling stores for the medical unit they would soon be organizing in Philadelphia; he had insisted he could do the job alone, that Martha must rest quietly at their inn until sailing time Toby had invented errands of his own, as a simple precaution, but when he had heard that Martha was shopping, with her black butler as company, he had believed the story. Enough, at any rate, to return to his room for a final accounting forty-eight hours before he was due aboard the Philadelphia packet. Enough to admit that he was bone-weary and stretch, fully clothed, on the counterpane of his bed

He had awakened in the muzzy dusk with a hot hand on his brow, a hot mouth searching his A woman was in his bed, in his arms—a woman who desired him with every fiber of a love-wise being That much he grasped before he wakened entirely Only when she whispered his name did he see that this was Martha's idea of a private good-by.

Galahad himself could hardly have bounded from a couch with more vehemence.

"How did you get in?"

"Love laughs at locksmiths, Toby"

"Did you think for a moment that I'd——"

Her chuckle was still husky with desire as they faced each other in the deepening dark. "If you hadn't been so ungallant as to awaken—and remember who you are——"

"Will you go—or shall I?"

"We've a good hour until my sailing—and Roy is meeting me at the pier Why shouldn't we admit we're human in the meantime?" She had, he noted, made no attempt to swing her lithe body upright, or even to smooth a froth of petticoat over her long silken legs

"I'll go, since you insist"

"You'll hear me first I've given Roy all he wants of me, and more Why shouldn't I come to you today—if it hurts no one?"

"Must I remind you that you're a Darby?"

"And if I say that that marriage was a mistake, would you pity me a little?"

Her voice broke, and he found he was almost believing her. "You knew what you wanted, Martha."

"And I got what I wanted Does that mean I'm happy?"

"No husband could be kinder. How often have you abused that trust?"

"This is my first indiscretion," she said. "Even if you won't make it complete."

Remembering certain gossip that had already reached him in Edinburgh, he found that he could flare at her in earnest. "I should have warned Roy two years ago. If I'd told him everything——"

"Roy would have laughed at your story then. He'd kill you now"

"I can believe that too. Why can't you give such devotion its reward?"

"What woman enjoys being loved by a *mind?*" She rose from the bed at last, to run pleading fingers through his hair. "If you knew how long I've waited for you to—to remember that you knew me once."

He cut in on that plea as brutally as he could "No marriage is perfect, Martha. You made yours with your eyes wide open You must keep it."

"We're two of a kind, Toby, we're both working for the Darbys in different ways. We *belong* to the Darbys—even now, when we've worked out our articles. Why shouldn't we enjoy a short holiday now and again?"

"I thought you had more pride."

"Don't talk nonsense," she whispered, and covered his mouth with a kiss that transported him to Sachem Cave in a twinkling Was it he who carried Martha back to that candlewick spread? Or had she drawn him there beside her? He broke free and staggered to the door before loyalty to Roy could drown in her nearness.

"I'll take that as our good-by, Toby," she said. "Perhaps you'll be bolder when we meet again."

He never remembered how he gained the street, or how he passed the weary hours until he could be sure that the Darby flagship had cast off from Clydebank But he remembered slinking among the warehouses to be sure, and watching the ship nose into the channel with the tide The ports of the after house were lighted Martha, as though sensing his eyes, had moved deliberately into one of those glowing circles to look back at Glasgow.

It had been a victory of sorts—even in retreat Following the quay to the next pier, where his Philadelphia packet was loading for her voyage to rebel waters, he could not be quite sure who had conquered.

vi

The rest belonged to the diary under his hand To the tattered regimentals that Darby gold had made new. To the smoke of war—and the cementing of his friendship with Roy

Darby at a hundred bivouac fires Today, and he repeated the conviction solemnly, no woman could shake that friendship Yes, that moment in Glasgow was the last threat worth remembering.

Pacing his quarters in the Vermont blockhouse, hearing the roar of the wind across the frozen wastes of Champlain, Dr. Tobias Kent paused at each turn to consign a handful of diary pages to the flames It was a romantic ceremony, he knew, but it relieved his spirits somewhat Almost as though he were burning away indecision with that fine-scrawled foolscap. As though he were forging his future in that feeble blaze

The two letters came last First, the note from Martha, worn on his person these three months, since it had come up from Savannah to brighten—and to confuse—this last long bivouac He had cursed her recklessness as he opened it—and had pored over it a hundred times, nonetheless Even now it cost him an effort to burn it, though he could have repeated every word by heart as he watched the loose paper ball flare into ash:

Savannah, Georgia
1st December, 1783

My Dear Toby

Greetings and salutations to a soon-returning Hero, from an old Admirer Can I say less—or dare I say more?—now that I have returned from my long Exile, to find my place in Savannah and await my husband's return? Bring him safely home again, my dear, *dear* friend—and, if God please, return my father-in-law to his family again—such of it as remains, after this Ruinous War . . .

So far she had merely repeated the pious japeries of the time, where the penmanship of the writer, rather than the writer's heartbeat, seemed all-important Picturing her as she wrote those lines—(in a flowing, peppermint-striped negligee, with chocolate steaming on her bed table and a hand-picked black housegirl hovering with a warming pan)—Toby had found he could chuckle over the soft deception At least it made an effective ambush for the letter itself, which began almost at once.

Savannah, itself is Pock-marked by war, corn-pone poor, proud as a Faded Beauty—and, to this Worldly Visitor, boring beyond words Two things enliven my *tristesse* these days the Teasing of your good friend Gabriel Thatch (who, as you know, has returned to reopen his printing plant, and reissue his inimitable *Mercury* once again) The other—need I add—is the all-but-open Warfare that now exists between my Sister-in-Law

and me. Why, Dr Kent, must the War of Women recommence the moment the War of Men leaves off?

Why Nancy and I must, of necessity, stand at Swords-Points, is, of course, understandable

First, my origin—or must I bow my head and say, My Humble Beginnings?

Second, the fact that I am Chatelaine of our house on Wright Square while she must live with Ruin, Spiders, and Chattering Blackamoors at Sangaree.

Third, and most vital, is her obvious Suspicion that Blood runs in my veins, instead of the Pale Ichor that pumps from her Patrician Heart

Speaking of Hearts, my d'r one, if I seem to pour out my own to you, do not despair. And make no Effort to escape me, for your Destiny and mine are bound forever, by more ties than the Flesh . Trust me, when I say that nothing is impossible for you in Savannah, if you Play your cards wisely, and rely on my Advice

No more for now. The surface Amenities are preserved here: have no fear of that The dashing Widow Gregory keeps to her Orbit, I to mine If I say that she hates me, if I insist that she is frustrated as a Lone Mare in Pasture, it is only that I read Nancy Gregory, née Nancy Darby, with a Woman's eyes She is my Enemy now She will be yours—for other reasons—the moment you set foot in Savannah Make *no mistake*, Toby, her roots go deep Her Hatred for such as we goes even deeper. We must not make the mistake of fighting her *separately*.

I will shed Light on this threat, when we meet Tell Roy that I cannot wait to take him in my Arms again. . . On *second* thought, tell Roy nothing Knowing you as I do, I *am sure that* it would need Torture to make you admit that you had received this Letter

from one who was once your Slave in Love
and may now call herself only
Your Obedient Servant
MARTHA GILLESPIE DARBY

Yes, it had been an audacious letter, even for Martha—though it had come by special courier, with little chance of missing its destination

Weighing the cause of its composition a hundred times, he suspected that only violent ennui could have produced it, though there was no blinking its underlying sincerity He had made no attempt to compose an answer. He felt that Martha expected none He could see that picture too, clearly enough. Like all women who are sure of their quarry, she could afford to wait

The second letter was from Gabriel Thatch, and he burned this, too, if only to sweep the desk clean. Like Gabriel himself, it was florid enough Yet it had a journalistic bounce that seemed to bring that alert gadfly into the room

Savannah, Georgia
2nd February, 1784

MY FRIEND:

Flitting between both Camps (as every good writer must) I can now offer a sound Interim Report on the bailiwick where we old campaigners have elected to pitch our Final Tent To extend the Metaphor, let me say at once that we have chosen a grove filled with Hornets of every breed

The Tories first, of course Mealy-Tories who stayed to turn their coats, but kept their Loyalist hearts (Like the Bristol clan, whose patriarch is Dr Matthew Bristol, your chief rival) Honest Tories like Roy's Sister, who went with their men into Exile, and return with their hearts unchanged If they are free agents, they enlist in the camp of the conservatives (that Grand Domain that lives content with its Yesterdays, and sets a face of flint against Tomorrow) Or they return widowed—as Nancy Darby Gregory does, from Nassau (You will recall that her husband prospered for a time as a captain of a prize crew, but died of Spotted Fever in the end)

Mostly, this type creeps back to its Blackn'd Hearth with hanging head· the unregenerate widow Gregory returns with her head high—and, at this writing, does her D——dst to stare down the reigning Mrs Darby, who holds the Keys to the Kingdom in trust, until her husband's return

Georgia, as you know, was only saved for the winning side by young Hotheads like myself, and old Hotheads like our Esteemed Commander (would, for the sake of his legend, that he could die on his Shield, and not in Bed, by inches!) Now that the Peace is won, it is proving an Uneasy Victory on all counts Commerce at a standstill The Odious Don rumbles threats across the St Marys as he repossesses the Floridas His Majesty's men-of-war cruise openly in our Estuary, on the pretense of hunting Deserters

But these are Concomitants of any Peace What really disturbs me is the rumblings of Discontent in Savannah itself—a Sickness that goes deeper than Bad Times, and touches every Heart in some measure Call it the Tory-sickness, if you like the pig-headed determination of the Aristocracy (and you know too well, how that Club was formed in our fair colony, how rigorous the admission-fees) to rule as though nothing had happened And if not to rule, to ruin

They at least know each other and they know what they want *We* know only that we are Americans—and that Word is yet to be defined Brothers-in-arms, can we remain Brothers-in-peace, and fight the good fight for a World that is all ours—with no Tolls to Kings or Squires?

I will close now, before my Eloquent Questioning overcomes us both If you must know all, these Passioned Queries are rhetorical—to be answered, with a resounding Yea, in my next week's editorial If you return next month to find Ye Print Shoppe a mass of smoking ruins, and Ye Editor a tarr'd Scarecrow cowering in the marsh, you will know the reason

Send word by Courier when the Die is cast for Genr'l Darby A realist always, I have a special page in type, recounting his services as a Georgian, with an eugolistic Poem composed by

one Michael Ravenna, a local Bard who bears a resemblance to your Humble Servant When a True Leader dies, men are too stunn'd to weep . .

Business takes me upriver to Augusta in mid-March, so I have every Hope of making the return Journey in your company, if you follow your resolve and visit Clay Creek before coming to Savannah It is a Course I cannot urge too strongly Like all Spoiled Utopias, our fair City should be approached slowly, with an open mind, to be savored fully

Tuus Amicus.
(and that, too, is from
the heart)
G T.

Cheered, as always, by the thought of Gabriel—and Gabriel's genius for puncturing established gods—Toby found that he could face his expected ordeal almost calmly. He would go to Savannah at long last, he would establish himself in medicine as Roy's partner—there was no other logical ending for the pattern that Victor Darby had established in his behalf in the Clay Creek schoolhouse

He would even face Roy's sister and her conclave of dragons as best he could As for Martha's offer of alliance—well, he would dismiss that as so much mumbo-jumbo until he faced Martha in the flesh.

Peace descended upon him as he rose at last from his long self-appraisal—the peace that comes only with decision He crossed his quarters in three long strides, remembering his neglect of the British visitors just outside Remembering, too, that he was hungrier than he had been in months, even before the aroma of bear steaks assailed his nostrils

At that precise moment he heard the door of Victor Darby's room burst open on the floor below, the crash of booted feet on the stair

Knowing what was coming, he felt his hand freeze on the door latch and forced it downward by a sheer effort of will The warm, smoke-billowed messroom swam in to meet him, along with the reek of rum from the punch bowl, the strange medley of blue and scarlet coats. He felt Lord Wystan's hand on his arm, its kindly pressure told him that the Briton, too, had guessed the import of those hurrying feet below Then, as Roy raced up the stair, he read the verdict in his friend's eyes, before Roy could speak A verdict that was no less shocking, though they had sensed its inevitability for weeks . .

"Come at once I think there's still time——"

Scarlet-coated officers as well as blue snapped to instant attention as silence clamped on the room Toby had already reached the stair, with Roy in his wake. Downstairs, yellow

candlelight spilled through the wide-open door of the commandant's quarters, and, with that gentle glow, a quiet that told its own story once again.

"Why didn't you call me sooner?"

"He wanted it this way, Toby"

Billy knelt at the foot of the four-poster, with his head bowed on two clenched black fists. Sam Hoyt was a burly shadow, unstirring in the half-light beyond the table where he had taken dictation so long Toby felt his eyes go to that table first of all, and noted, with no surprise, that it was swept bare, save for a single sheet of foolscap weighted down by an almost empty inkpot *First he writes his orders,* he thought. *Then he issues them* He felt no resentment at the sequence. It had always been Victor Darby's way.

The general, propped high in pillows, his shoulders swathed in a boat cloak, resembled a bronze of himself cast in heroic lines His long illness had hardly spoiled the tan of those cheeks, even the hands, plucking imaginary patterns in the high-piled quilts that covered him, had lost none of their strength as life itself ebbed from the finger ends. . . . Toby felt the familiar probe of the eyes, and gave a small sigh as they nailed him to the carpet. Then, forcing his feet a little, he advanced to the foot of the bed, to drop a soothing hand on Billy's shoulder Billy did not raise his head; Sam Hoyt, a ruddy colossus in the shadows, stared back at him unseeing

A sentence from Gabriel's letter popped into his mind and stuck there. When a true leader dies, men are too stunned to weep.

"Forgive me, Toby. As you see, my timing is bad"

He felt his tension break with Victor's words, and moved forward to take the old man's hand within his own. "Don't talk It only weakens you"

"I'm afraid I must It's my last chance to talk—on this earth. I can hardly—neglect it" The vibrant voice defied Toby's warning. Only the long pauses between words, the sharp fight for breath, betrayed the speaker's agony.

"You've given me my orders, sir. You know I'll follow them"

"Not *all* your orders, Toby." Victor's free hand gestured feebly toward the single sheet of foolscap on the writing table. "Sam will read them—presently Wanted to—read 'em myself Wanted to explain 'em. Not that they'll—need explaining——"

Sam Hoyt stirred in the shadows, and Toby, without turning from the bedside, caught the overseer's imploring gesture. He nodded as Victor's eyelids flickered Whatever the dying man asked, he knew he would promise it now.

"There's been no one like you, Toby. No one at all. You've made the others complete. Or you will, before you've finished." If the voice wandered, his purpose was clear enough, the hand that held Toby at the bedside tightened

"Remember how I said you had steel in your fingers? That I'd make you a surgeon? It was only a beginning. You know that now, don't you, Toby?" Again the losing fight for breath was won by a miracle "There are other ills in Georgia Too many ills Too deep-seated to reach with a knife. But there are ways to fight 'em To drive 'em out. Not in my lifetime Or yours Or the next. What does it matter? The fight's the thing. To live by fighting To see that the hardest fight must come when the war's ended."

"We all see that, sir"

"You'll forget in time. That paper's to remind you."

Sam Hoyt came forward with the words, and held out the sheet of foolscap to Toby. He stared at Darby's head overseer rather than at the paper As always, Sam reminded him of a grotesque, rather kindly mastiff, from his bulging calves to the tight-cropped hair An ancient Son of Liberty who proved his humanity by quoting Paine and Rousseau instead of barking He pulled his mind back from that insane wandering, conscious again of Victor's eyes. Perhaps he had not wandered too far afield at that Sam had done yeoman's service in the war, before and after Georgia was invaded. Inevitably he would be part of Victor Darby's plans

"Sam has signed the paper," said Victor Abruptly his voice was tired, almost normal. "I know that you and Roy will sign it too"

"It isn't your will, then?"

"It's an agreement among you all Not that good men need agreements This paper's for—for the world to read Especially our little world of Savannah" Amazingly, Victor Darby's tone was effortless now, as though he were clinching a point in philosophy above a glass of port. "Gabriel Thatch will publish it in the *Mercury* when you give the order. A copy went forward, along with my will My lawyer will have read both when you arrive in Savannah. He'll be ready to—to protect your interests."

"Shall Sam read it aloud?"

"There isn't time, Toby There isn't need You've promised to—to follow my wishes I know you'll keep that promise" The voice was fainter now, though the old man still spoke easily enough "I've bought brains in my time, and polished 'em I've given men their start But you're the best investment I ever made"

Toby found his voice—and kept it gruff, to balance the

tears he could not hide Across the bed he saw that Roy was kneeling now.

"I'll try to—to pay you back, sir."

"See that you do, my boy Begin the paper, Sam. I want to—to hear the words as I go"

Sam tried to speak, but emotion had choked him long before. Again he handed the paper to Toby, who caught it in mid-air, just as it was slipping from the overseer's trembling fingers.

For a moment Toby was sure that the words would blur, and cursed the tears that filled his eyes And then his vision cleared Even in the faint sheen of the candles Sam's round clerk's hand, learned, as Toby's had been, in a schoolhouse deep in the barrens, was easy as copper plate:

" 'I, Victor Darby, knowing that I shall shortly be taken *to my Maker, and having already indicated my last will and* testament, do hereby add this solemn codicil, which, like my will itself, shall be binding on my heirs and assigns——' "

His voice faltered on the long opening phrases Somehow, he had expected eloquence to match Jefferson's Or, at the very least, some bravura gesture at fate, in keeping with the author's credo

"Go on," murmured Victor Darby "The poetry comes later."

" '. . . binding on my heirs and assigns, subject to the exceptions noted below. All that I possess I leave to a company which shall be organized by the following persons. Dr. Tobias Kent——' "

"Go on, Toby. I told you it was poetry!"

" 'Dr. Tobias Kent Dr Roy Darby, my son Sam Hoyt, my chief factor. And Nancy Darby Gregory, my beloved daughter The company shall be operated, and profits distributed, as outlined below. As president and chief director, Dr Tobias Kent will interpret these rules as he sees fit, including the handling of all monies. Though it is my earnest wish that he discuss all decisions with the three directors just named, his decisions shall be final, his power of veto absolute——' "

There was more, but Toby found that the page had blurred after all, even as his mind grasped the future that Victor Darby had mapped for him. Then the mist cleared, and he looked down into his commanding general's eyes for the last time Even as his doctor's brain noted the shape of death behind the blue curtain of the iris, he heard the hoarse, laryngeal rattle that is death's other symbol, whatever the victim

"A promise, Toby."

"A promise, sir."

There was no time for more as the fingers on the quilt sought for a spot to cling, and found none . . . They stood aside while Billy—still weeping quietly—came round the bed to close the dead general's eyes.

vii

"Will you go on, Doctor?"

Sam's voice was strangely matter-of-fact Toby, shocked out a deep reverie, choked down his anger in time.

"Not *here*, Sam!"

"He wanted you to finish the—the reading. He said as much, as I wrote it down"

"We'll finish in the other room"

Roy followed them blindly into the general's antechamber. And yet Toby noted that his friend was calm enough for all the glint of tears in his eyes Amazingly calm, for a legitimate heir whose whole future was locked in a half-read, half-understood document His eye strayed to the paper still crumpled in his free hand Just in time he fought down a crazy impulse to cast Victor Darby's instructions into the fire that danced in the open grate between them.

"I can't believe he's gone, somehow."

Roy had spoken at last, in a dry, hard voice Like Toby, he seemed to be staring into empty space. "He's given us orders too long Naturally, they can't stop like *that!*" Roy's fist struck his open palm with surprising violence. "Read that paper through, Toby It's the last order he'll ever give"

"From what I've read, I'd say it was only the beginning"

It was Sam's turn to take the paper, with a small, respectful bow. "Will it go easier, young gentlemen, if I read and you listen?"

Sam's voice was as terse as a court clerk's. Realizing that he had taken that tone to soothe them both, Toby pulled Roy down on a rough bench beside the fire, giving Sam the floor Roy, too, had been right that the mortal remains of Victor Darby lay just inside the door, covered with a Vermont sampler, did not alter the fact that the general's spirit still brooded over the scene

" 'I make this stipulation,' " droned Sam, " 'in the full knowledge that Dr. Tobias Kent is of an integrity above reproach, and that he will always so order his actions on the same principle that inspires our fledgling republic: E Pluribus Unum' "

Yes, it had been like Victor Darby to add that unifying tag of Latin. Despite himself, Toby smiled faintly as Sam's

tongue fumbled the phrase Old Victor would never have grudged him that smile

"'It is further stipulated,'" read Sam, "'that my home in Wright Square, Savannah, shall be occupied by Dr Kent as his own—as a kind of headquarters for the company he now commands This domicile, as my will provides, is part of my general bequest to him—with the provision that my son Roy, his wife and heirs, and my daughter Nancy and her heirs shall have the right to occupy this house also during the period of their lives '"

"Did Gregory leave issue?"

Toby had not meant to interrupt the words had simply forced themselves out of the heart of his half-attentive brain. For no reason at all he had pictured Nancy Darby Gregory as a ramrod-stiff spinster, despite her long marriage and exile.

"Gregory left Nancy childless," said Roy. His eyes searched Toby's face, as though he, too, was surprised at the question. "I suppose this is to cover dowry demands, if she marries again I believe she's being courted now by one of the Bristols"

"It's beyond courting, Mr Roy," said Sam. "Miss Nancy —or Mistress Gregory—is only waiting for your return to announce their engagement" He hesitated, with his eyes on the paper—obviously wondering at the interruption, and yet understanding too. "If you ask me, gentlemen, Miss Nancy and Mr. Harvey Bristol will be our stumbling blocks in this venture."

"Why should Nancy object?" asked Roy. "Surely this is in her interest too"

"Perhaps I'd best read on," said Sam

There were no more breaks as he completed Victor Darby's instructions. Item by item, the structure of the proposed company emerged from the overseer's dry monotone. Victor had covered his holdings thoroughly, from the most remote woodlot to the fleet that had just begun to reassemble at his Savannah River piers The tobacco acreage and warehouse at the upriver hamlet of Darbyville, the sawmills and turpentine still at Clay Creek, the vast rice plantation called Sangaree, on its own island downstream from Savannah, even the small plot devoted to the experimental raising of cotton—all were listed, with their latest valuations and the probable yield as they went into full production again.

Toby felt his head swim as he strove to grasp these figures in their entirety. He had known that Victor Darby was a rich man Somehow, he had never pictured the reason for that wealth, in its entirety.

But it was the manner in which the estate was to be administered—and the power entrusted to his hands—that

shocked Toby most of all The Founder—and it seemed most appropriate to bestow the title on Old Victor, now that he had gone beyond praise or blame—was explicit here Subject only to Toby's will, assets could be sold or redistributed, profits could be divided as he saw fit Though the Founder insisted that each of his workers should be paid on a sharing basis, according to his contribution, it was for Toby to determine the value of that contribution to the over-all success The Darby Company, in short—instead of remaining a closed corporation for the benefit of the heirs alone—was to share its plenty, beginning with the directors themselves and extending downward to the humblest slave

As for his slaves—and there were perhaps a thousand of these, scattered from Sangaree to the back-country plantations—it was obviously impossible to manumit all, or even a majority, at present The Founder's notes on this point steered a shrewd course between idealism and expediency. the Founder himself, abhorring slavery from the heart out, had moved warily with his times, daring to educate such of his Negroes as seemed likely to profit by schooling, increasing their creature comforts just enough to make sure of their health and loyalty, without risking the concerted wrath of neighbor planters Under the new regime, Toby was instructed to step up the rate of this largess, to increase the educational level as local ordinance permitted, and, above all, to manumit as rapidly as he dared Again, the temper of the times and the ruinous taxes on manumission were to be his guiding principles

Indentured workers on upcountry farms, as before, were to be encouraged to buy out their articles, a transaction that would be speeded mightily, now that these white bondsmen were to be paid in shares Naturally, they would be encouraged to stay within the company when they attained citizenship By the same token, their shares—again at Toby's discretion—were to be increased with their initiative

The above principle—and the Founder stressed this more than once in his instructions—was of paramount importance in administering the company Each of the directors was to receive a substantial share, but no more than their contribution—again in Toby's opinion—warranted The same yardstick applied to Old Victor's numerous heirs outside the family—persons who, in the natural order of things, would expect substantial bequests for no other reason than the ties of blood These, said the Founder's worksheet, were to be offered positions in the company, according to ability, and would be paid no more or less than they earned.

Working on this basis, Toby was instructed to give the

company a trial run of two years. Profits, in the orthodox sense, were to be strictly accountd for, even after their joint distribution. If, at the expiration of this trial, the accounting was found to be substantially less than under the old regime, the project was to be abandoned.

Sam read these concluding paragraphs with a slight flourish, as though they made amends for what had gone before

" 'It is my especial wish—and one which, I am sure, is dear to the hearts of my son and Dr Kent—that they enter practice together in Savannah To this end I have educated them from the beginning. However, I feel it is still more important that they stand on their own feet as doctors, and make their way on their merits Therefore, no provision has been made in my will for establishing them in practice—other than the creation and endowment of a clinic adjoining the Darby offices, where all of the poor sick of Savannah shall be treated gratis, to the best of the doctors' ability Later, it is my-wish that a hospital be erected for a similar purpose, out of company funds. This endowment will care for the health of all company members and as many of our indigent sick as can be accommodated, but the establishment is to be erected at the discretion of the company president, and must, of course, be sold when and if the company is liquidated.

" 'Regarding the above-mentioned liquidation, it should be obvious, at the end of two years, if the venture is to be blessed with success—or, like another Utopia projected by General Oglethorpe, doomed to collapse under the twin assaults of jealousy and greed. In the latter unhappy event it is my wish that the residue, including the house already mentioned as bequeathed to Dr. Tobias Kent, shall revert to my daughter Nancy, who is empowered, by the terms of my will, to liquidate any and all items as she sees fit, for her own gain—and, especially, to maintain her abode, the manor house known as Sangaree.

" 'I have made this melancholy provision as a man of the world, not as a misanthrope. In her widowhood, my daughter might well be left without means of support, if the company should fail utterly Dr Roy Darby and Dr. Tobias Kent, with a profession at their finger ends, can always earn a living Sam Hoyt, my overseer, is likewise equipped to face the rigors of a man's world.

" 'It is my further wish that Dr Tobias Kent, Roy Darby, and Sam Hoyt affix their signatures to this instruction sheet, as evidence that they accept the stipulations contained therein. It is also my wish that at such a time as my actual will is opened in Savannah my daughter Nancy will also affix her signature, as a similar acceptance. However, if she shall fail

to do so, my instructions are to be carried out *nonetheless*—without, in any way, affecting her rights to share in the profits of the company.' "

There was a long silence as Sam rolled out the last phrase. Roy broke it at last, with the inevitable question.

"Sorry you promised, Toby?"

"I'm not sure yet."

In his ears Toby's voice sounded quite as vague as his words. His head still swam. Tomorrow, of course, he would waken to the full weight of this responsibility. Tonight, he could only rejoice that Victor, in his wisdom, had put a time limit on the experiment. And yet, even as his brain reeled under the challenge, he found that he was responding to the idea, with every sense alert. As Utopias went, this one had a ring of common sense about it, even now. Certainly, with the good will of the directors, he could count on help from Darby hands, black and white. His yeoman's blood insisted on that, even as his wordly brain multiplied the dangers ahead.

Sam had already settled on the bench and spread the paper on his knee. "He asked us all to sign, below his own name. As you see, gentlemen, I've already done so."

Roy looked up from a reverie of his own. "Did you think we wouldn't? After Toby gave his word? That's all that matters."

But Toby was on his feet at last, pacing out his doubts, and rejoicing in the release the questions gave.

"What will your sister say to this?"

"She'll fight us, tooth and claw," said Roy calmly. "Bristol's a lawyer, I believe. If he isn't mentioned in that will, he'll help her to break it. Failing that, they'll try to declare the company illegal."

"Will they succeed?"

"Not if we hit back. I've fought Nancy before—it's no novelty. I expected a battle royal in any case over Martha."

Toby started—and hoped that he had masked the reaction at Martha's name. The events of the past hour had made that old passion seem strangely pallid.

"What are your views on the manumission of the Negroes?"

"Substantially what Father said. We must go slowly. Perhaps, if the company succeeds, we can free a quarter of them in our lifetime. Slavery is too valuable, to the Southern mind. Its value must increase with the years. You can improve your century here and there—you can't change it completely."

"And you, Sam?"

The overseer considered his answer. "Slavery is our peculiar curse, Dr. Toby. I, for one, thought the Revolution should

have gone all the way, and abolished it Now, of course, I can see a bit further into our leaders' minds. Study it any way you like, our Revolution wasn't *really* a revolution All it proved was that we needn't pay taxes to Britain any more. That we're free to get rich in our own way from now on."

"You aren't usually so cynical, Sam."

"Call it a blacklash from the old gentleman's going, sir. There weren't many like him in Georgia, a rich man with the poor man's lot in mind is as rare as virtue in hell, if you'll pardon the comparison"

"We'll be attacked from every side"

"Only from the outside Our own people will fight for us, from tidewater to the mountains I'll vouch for that"

"So will I, by God!" Toby pulled up sharply, startled by his own vehemence But Sam Hoyt—the rugged tenant who had risen by his own bootstraps, the self-educated thinker who pored over Paine, Locke, and Hume by the light of a homemade candle—only chuckled

"See what I mean, Mr. Roy? *We'll* pull together. So will every *manjack* on your *plantations*"

"On *our* plantations, Sam," said Roy gravely.

"Correction accepted, sir—for a two-year tenure. Leave the back country to me, gentlemen. Black, white, and shades between Just keep our docks open in Savannah I'll see to it that the wealth pours through" It was Sam's turn to pace, uplifted by that vision. "Maybe I was wrong Maybe the Revolution *was* won, after all—in our corner of Georgia"

"D'you think we'll win, Roy?"

"I think it's worth a trial," said Roy slowly "Not that I'd have dared it on my own"

"You aren't unhappy that he didn't leave you the estate outright?"

"I've known he planned something like this for a long time," said Roy "He asked that it be kept secret from you, Toby, until he could be sure of you"

"When did he decide?"

Roy smiled faintly. "You must go to his private papers for that"

Toby found himself nodding automatically. It was not the first time Victor Darby's "papers" had been mentioned He had always known that his commanding general was a great scholar—and a writer—as well as a great gentleman

"It's quite like your father to leave his memoirs"

"You'll read them when you visit Sangaree," said Roy. "A dozen foolscap volumes Locked in a secretaire desk in his library I'm sure Nancy will give you the key"

"And are you sure he'd have wanted me to read them?"

"You, above all," said Roy.
"I'm afraid I don't follow."
"You will," said Roy. "He even meant to publish them someday."
"So our final orders are at Sangaree?"
"Precisely. And we've only Nancy's world to fight. I'm afraid it's a large world, Toby."
Toby nodded a silent agreement. They both knew how narrowly Georgia had escaped slipping over to the loyalist side, and how many of those same loyalists had emerged from their burrows, now that peace with England was a reality Adding to this bloc the natural conservatives, who had aided the Revolution solely to cancel their debts in London, and Toby felt that he was facing a solid army of enemies. He spoke his doubts aloud one more time.
"By rights you belong with them "
Roy's eyes sparkled "Don't be stuffy on *our* side, Toby. Father belonged with the future He died for it—as you've just seen Why shouldn't I back him now?"
"So we're three to one at present?"
"We'll need that majority within the company."
"Perhaps we're doing your sister an injustice."
"You wouldn't say that, if you knew Nancy. She married a Gregory. She's evidently marrying a Bristol. Can I say more than that, Sam?"
The Darby overseer shrugged "Miss Nancy's a lady, young gentlemen Miss Nancy has been a lady from the beginning. She believes that ladies are a race apart. Men have died when they challenged that belief. And I don't mean on the field of honor "
Toby nodded soberly "Perhaps we've all said enough."
"I'll add one thought," said Roy "Even if Nancy forgets she's a lady—and flies at your throat——"
"Or vice versa?"
"Or vice versa, this will be a fight worth joining "

viii

He stood atop the blockhouse, watching the dawn burn like white fire over Canada To his left the vast plain of the lake, whipped by last night's gale, showed great spots of glare ice, beginning to wink in the pale rays To his right the hills of Vermont—rock buttressed, thick-forested, touched here and there with wood smoke from a few cabin chimneys—were already tranquil with morning Dr. Tobias Kent shivered in his fur-collared greatcoat and drank in the peace like a benediction.

By all the rules of logic this should have been the saddest morning of his life—with his benefactor dead in a shuttered room below and a future, alive with threats, scowling around the corner of tomorrow. But he could hardly remember when he had felt more at peace with the world—or more certain of his power. Or happier in a dedication that went beyond self.

Perhaps he had unearthed the root of his malaise in that act of dedication. Perhaps he had lived with himself and his surgeon's kit too long. He stumped once around the terreplein as he worked that hypothesis out—shielding his eyes against the blue-white blaze of Missisquoi Bay, turning with relief to the cool green spruce forest to the east. There, like a finger beckoning, was the smoke that marked the posting inn on the St. Albans trace—their only real link with the settled country to the south. There, before too many days had passed, they would saddle their first mount for the long ride to Burlington.

Tomorrow, or the day after, would be the time for that long-deferred departure. With Victor Darby consigned to the frozen earth—it was quite like Old Victor to insist that he be buried where he died, with simple soldier honors—they had every right to resign their commands on the spot. Colonel Wriston could take charge at the fort until the ice broke in the spring. Toby's surgeon mates, as veterans of the field, could take over his fevers and frostbites now.

A dedication that went beyond self. He murmured the phrase, letting the words escape in the cloud of his half-frozen breath. They sounded pretentious enough when spoken aloud, but the emotion behind them would endure.

If Victor Darby's life had had meaning, it spelled independence for the Tobias Kents in this new-found democracy. If Victor had trained him to consolidate that independence, to extend it, to give it a living meaning, he would accept his task. It was hard to vision success, even within the Darby domain. Too many shopworn idols stood four-square in his path. Too many old hates would rise again, now that the peace had come. The battle was still worth joining, even if victory never came.

A bugle sang across the snow, wakening the echoes in the Vermont hills. He turned back to his own parade ground and drew in his breath at what he saw.

Darby's Rangers had turned out for reveille today, down to the last man. Standing at parade rest, with Colonel Wriston accepting the salutes of the company commanders, they made a brave display, despite the scattering of coonskin caps in the rear ranks. As he watched, Toby saw the flag come to half-mast above the wooden portcullis of the gate—the gate itself

had just creaked open to allow the British dog sled free passage

The Rangers stood at attention, saluting their flag The knot of British officers, moving like bright birds in the snow, responded in kind—whipping gloved hands to shakos with a precision worthy of the Horse Guards. The bugle still sang as the scarlet line, marching smartly in the dog sled's wake, vanished between two snowbanks on Missisquoi Bay.

Gleaming with newness, the flag of the brand-new nation whipped smartly in the morning the thirteen stars of union were brave in their square blue field. Toby found that he had saluted that emblem, too, as smartly as the others, before he marched below to give orders for his commanding general's funeral.

TWO • THE SAVANNAH

FROM where he coasted, contented as a porpoise on the river's flood crest, the flatboat seemed a giant water bug, pursuing him lazily. Laced with red clay at each shore, where the mushrooming surface had spread among the oleanders and wateroaks of the bottom lands, the Savannah was clear enough in midstream, throbbing with a pulse all its own in its run to the sea. Toby let his naked limbs spread-eagle in the current Surrendering to its tug, he was one with Georgia again—one with a carefree boyhood, excluding problems firmly

He had taken a header overside a good half-hour ago, when the hot March sun awakened him The flatboat, moored at the last of the Darby turpentine stills, groaning deep in the river, had accepted its last resin barrel, the two Negroes at the sweeps, shouting with laughter as Toby plunged, had just cast off their stern lines Now, merely by fighting the current for a space, Toby could permit the barge to range alongside, the smell of ham frying amidships, mingled with the aroma of roasting coffee, had lured him more than once But he had resisted temptation so far This interlude, alone with the red-clay stream he knew so well, was too precious to surrender lightly

Darbyville, and all that lay beyond its tobacco fields, waited

around the next dog-leg bend From all the portents this would be his last real moment alone.

Toby had taken ship to Charleston, from the New England port of Providence, leaving Roy and Sam Hoyt to go over the firm's wartime accounts with their Boston factor, he had followed the long side of the triangle to Clay Creek for a last look at his boyhood—rather than sail direct to Savannah, and trace the pattern of his future He had had no reason to visit Savannah until Old Victor's will was opened No excuse at all to test his reaction to Martha Or to investigate the enigma of Nancy Darby Gregory—to name his most pressing problems—until Roy could prepare her, in some measure, for his entrance into her world Or so he had reasoned, as he rode upcountry in the green spring, breathing deep of the past again, reveling in each remembered sound and odor.

The back country bore the casual thumb print of war here and there. Blackened villages where British raiders and their Indian jackals had struck at supply lines in the long, hit-and-run battle that had never quite shaped a decisive victory for either side. Gutted farms and fields gone back to palmetto scrub were commonplace sights when he crossed the river at High Ford and galloped down the red-clay traces of his native state again. Even now he could see that the Darby holdings had not gone untouched, to put the case mildly If anything, these raids had seemed to strike deliberately at all that belonged to the commander of the famous Rangers, secure in the knowledge that the Rangers themselves were far afield.

Perhaps it was well that the old hero, with his usual foresight, had contrived to bank a separate fortune in privateering while the war was in progress Toby knew that it would take a fortune, and some tidy economy besides, to bring back the sheen of plenty to this land.

But for the most part it had been easy enough to put the war behind him when he reached Clay Creek Busy, as always, with spring plowing, or hacking new trails through the scrub, to clear the long line to the turpentine camps, Clay Creek had taken revolution in its stride, and faced its present emancipation from Britain with upcountry calm. It had welcomed its distinguished son with the same aplomb It was good to be accepted for what he was, minus the patina of the Darby wealth To walk for hours in the barrens and chat with the loggers again in heat-drugged noonings To spirit the ordinary's new serving wench to Sachem Cave, and exorcise a few ghosts in the long spring dusk. . . .

Far upstream now, the great bell in the turpentine still

announced the breakfast halt in three long, brazen calls. Obeying an instinct he could not name, Toby swam hard against the current for a few moments, until the deep-loaded flatboat loomed above him and he could swarm overside The brassy reverberation of that bell was like a voice, calling from his childhood. Clambering atop a stack of lumber amidships, he shaded his eyes against the glare and looked back at the cluster of buildings on the far shore—as though he could catch a final glimpse of the world he was leaving The six fat stills had been built on a slight rise to protect them from floodwater. Even at that early hour the cone-shaped tar kiln belched inky smoke against the blue. Though it was too far to hear the whine of the saws in the lumber mill, he imagined he could just catch the flash of the blades in the sunlight

He stood lost in memories as the flatboat slewed tipsily into the next bend—unconscious of his river-wet nakedness A shout from one of the sweeps brought him back; he ducked, just in time, as a limb of a giant live oak swept across the barge's bow, all but grazing the highest pyramid of goods aboard Nosing for slack water, the flatboat seemed about to run head on among the drowned willow clumps ashore And then, gauging the tug of the current, the two sweeps took the river on the barge's other bow, spun her, not-too-clumsily, on her broad stern, and pulled downstream, into a tan-colored reach blazing with sun and broad as an inland sea

"Come out of it, you red-clay Adam. Whoever heard of Adam brooding before breakfast?"

Gabriel Thatch had shouted from the door of the snug after house they had shared for this lazy journey from Augusta Gabriel himself now emerged into the sunlight with a prodigious yawn—a vital, young-old man, as out of place on this cluttered barge as Beau Nash in a cornfield. For the seventh time in as many days Toby gaped at his friend's wardrobe From the lacquered Hessian boots—a concession to the fact that he would be riding into the fields today—to the magnificent gilt buttons on his stupendous waistcoat, Gabriel could have been delivered bodily from a London tailor Only the round carrot-topped head, shaved close as a bullet, was familiar—and that, as Toby knew, would soon be hidden by a white club wig, a crowning detail that befitted the printer of Georgia's leading journal.

"Now that you've risen from the primordial ooze," said Gabriel, "shouldn't you remember that the devil taught us modesty? We're out of swamp water. There'll be houses along the bank in the next mile—and then Darbyville "

The journalist settled as he spoke, fastidiously lifting his coattails from the mud-spattered hogshead. Toby vaulted

sheepishly to the flatboat's slatted deck and braced himself against a stanchion as Billy, coming from the after house, sluiced him liberally with bucketfuls of clear water

It had been a morning ritual since they left Augusta—as regular as the platter of steaming hoecake, the ham with hominy, the scalding pannikin of tea drowned in country cream Toby wolfed these delicacies as he toweled himself in the sunlight, and grinned back at Gabriel's thoughtful frown The journalist, lolling in the shade with a riding crop twirling lazily in long white fingers, seemed more puzzled than amused. Perhaps, thought Toby, he expected to find me nervous as a polecat this morning Like most cynics, Gabriel was always disappointed when mere man could rise, unaided, above his sins—or above an approaching ordeal

"Aren't you going to dress, even now?"

"Is it wrong of Adam to enjoy his liberty until the last moment?" But Toby submitted, readily enough, when Billy brought fresh-tailored smallclothes Gabriel continued to frown as Toby stepped into knee-length linen drawers, drew the fine broadcloth snugly over his hips, and stamped into tight jack boots Billy, whisking a broad cinch of Moroccan leather around the waistband, sawed on the buckle until Toby gasped for breath

"The shirt can come later, when we're really close I want all this sunshine I can take"

Gabriel stayed pointedly in deep shade as Toby stretched full length on the flatboat's gunwale to expose his back to the glare "That nutbrown tan may become you in barracks You'll find your Savannah gentleman prefers a midnight pallor"

"Go on," said Toby resignedly. "This is almost your last chance for a lesson in manners"

"I might add that it will be I who inspect the tobacco fields with Sam this noon *You,* my friend, are to proceed in lonely state to Savannah."

"I'm aware of that"

"Then you should dress your part. Silver buckles and silken shanks, at the least. And gray satin to bring out the muscles in those classic thighs I brought you all that finery, and more, as per agreement, when we met in Augusta And a selection of wigs to make a duke's mouth water Why haven't you shaved that thick skull and let Billy fit them?"

"Thank you, no I'll wear my own hair"

"Haven't you shocked Savannah enough, sight unseen?"

Toby sighed contentedly in the morning, and flexed his long limbs as if for battle Gabriel had already spoken, in no uncertain terms, of the raging in Savannah when Victor Darby's

will had been made public—via the pages of Gabriel's own *Mercury* Not since the departure of Lord Cornwallis, said Gabriel, had a man been cursed more roundly than Dr. Tobias Kent—though the inspiration for Savannah's curses had been somewhat different

Gabriel, *still beating a thoughtful tattoo on one mirror-dark* boot, added a coda to that description now. "Scratch a Briton's pocketbook, and you lay bare his heart Our enemies in Savannah are Britons still, though we've changed our flag. They've been willing to give our republic lip service, if their privileges aren't threatened, and their money's in strong boxes abroad "

"Aren't you a little hard on our best people?"

"*We're* our best people, Toby."

"All of us?"

"Naturally not. There are apes and rascals at every level. But if this revolution means anything, men like you and me —backwoods men with brains—have a chance to better ourselves A real chance, for the first time in history Victor Darby's will gives us that chance. Therefore, you're being cursed roundly by the moneybags Moneybags have always resisted change, since gold was invented."

"I'm glad you're on my side, at least."

"Aren't you forgetting who finances the *Mercury?*" Gabriel's voice was bland as cream, as though he regretted his flash of brotherhood

"Have you lost many readers?"

"On the contrary, I've gained a few Every nabob who sat out the fighting in Nassau or St. Augustine seems eager to know what we'll do next Incidentally, they'll expect an announcement from you when you're established You'll be fairly busy for a space, so I've prepared it in advance."

"Are you thinking for me too?"

"Haven't we always thought as one? Remember, I've fought two duels since I printed my editorial praising the company. Tomorrow I'll print Victor Darby's manifesto in full—as the greatest statement of first principles since the Declaration Balance that against *your* statement that you mean to implement the Founder's wishes and you'll be receiving challenges too As you know, Harvey Bristol's already boasted he'll call you out."

"Did you tell him I've given my proofs in Edinburgh?"

"Young Bristol's no fool," said Gabriel "Nancy wouldn't marry a fool—or a coward And he can shoot almost as straight as you or I Perhaps we should have our morning target practice, just to keep our hands in "

Toby did not stir from the rail. "Be reasonable, Gabriel

These ex-Tories can't fight me until they give me a chance. Nancy's fiancé, especially After all, he's her lawyer too "

"Never underestimate the enemy—and that goes double when a war's just ended They'll fight you with lead and with lawbooks With both at once, if it suits their purpose. Though I suppose the law will come first, at that, young Bristol has only cursed you in his cups, so far. Are you prepared to show cause why the will shouldn't be set aside?"

"I'm no lawyer, but I'll argue that case myself "

"Judge Armstrong will hear both sides in chambers tomorrow," said Gabriel thoughtfully. "Have you considered that?"

"Naturally You've reminded me of the date often "

"It bears repeating " Gabriel forgot his aplomb long enough to stride to the bow of the flatboat and blink at the wide, tan immensity of the river ahead. "I'm asking you again how you can be so calm "

"We were at Monmouth together," said Toby. "Yes, and at Saratoga and the Forge You'd learn to be calm yourself, then To rest when you could, and stop thinking This is another sort of battle, and I'm resting on the edge of it."

"A little strategy wouldn't come amiss "

"How can I plan until I know my enemies?"

"You won't take my word that they're honing their bayonets, from Nancy down?"

"Of course I do I think our artillery will stand against them "

"So you *do* have a plan?"

"Give Sam Hoyt the credit Our heaviest ammunition is hard money. British pounds and London bills of exchange. Payment for British prizes taken during British colonists' rebellion Enough gold to last out our two years' probation, and more If Sam's right, your returned Tories—and that includes the Bristols—can't pay their way in any coin but gentility."

"Don't think you'll buy them out "

"I'm aware that gentlemen don't auction their birthright. They can still be undersold in the open market—and overbid."

"So you mean to fight for your share of trade?"

"It's *they* who must fight, Gabriel We have the bottoms, and the cash Seventy per cent of the shipping in Savannah must outfit at Darby docks, if I may believe Sam's first report. Our naval stores are in good supply, thank God, the British didn't strike as far upcountry as Clay Creek Again, according to Sam, we can get out a tobacco crop this fall, if we're willing to pay top prices for journeymen hands—only half the fields at Darbyville have gone back to brush since the war It's another

story at Sangaree, of course; we may take a loss there on our rice, but we've no choice but to dike and plant."

"Spoken like a true country boy," said Gabriel. "What if our rich enemies won't buy from us?"

"Then we boycott them in turn, and sell abroad. My guess is that our real profits will come from France and England this first year."

"Suppose the British close their ports to American bottoms? Already it's rumored that they'll fence us out of the Indies."

"Then we keep our guns, and fight our way into Europe," said Toby calmly. "The market's there for all we produce, from rice to resin. Yankees sold in that market all during the Revolution. Darby ships took their share, side by side with the Boston privateersmen. Why shouldn't we continue?"

"You don't mind the gamble?"

"We've no choice, as of now. I'll grant you that a bad crop—or a few losses at sea—might wreck us before we're under way. Sam says that with the best of luck we may lose ten thousand pounds this first year. I hope to gain twenty, when we're in full production again."

Gabriel sighed, and studied Toby under narrowed lids. That sigh, Toby realized, was his friend's closest approach to open admiration.

"Proceeding at that rate, the Darby Company could buy up Georgia in ten years."

"Production on this scale can make Georgia richer than any one Midas. If we prove that a few thousand honest workers, acting as a unit, can turn a profit for themselves and enrich the state as well——" Toby let the rest of the thought escape, and stared moodily at the brown bubbling current under the flatboat's gunwale. "Of course I'm talking in symbols now—and round numbers. Both have led better men to their doom. I still feel that we should state our case boldly."

Gabriel's riding crop resumed its gentle tempo against Gabriel's boot. "As I just remarked, you already have."

"Perhaps I should review that statement in the *Mercury*."

"You may see a proof sheet tomorrow, it wasn't in type when I came upriver. However, I doubt that even you could make it stronger."

Toby rose from the rail and stretched mightily in the sun. "Very well, Gabriel, I'll trust you with my first public utterance."

"And fight only the people I say?"

"That's a promise too. I expect to be too busy for duels."

"Hold your tongue, and keep your opinions to yourself," said Gabriel. "I doubt if you'll be challenged outright, unless you provoke them."

"I'm provoking no one—unless an offer of friendship is provoking."

Gabriel sighed in earnest. "If you mean to make friends with gentlemen, you'd do well to wear the same coat and wig. *I've* managed it, why can't you?"

"Perhaps you enjoy strutting more than I."

"I'm sure I do. It does a hack no harm to be a bit of a popinjay. The same goes double for an upcountry interloper. Or, as the Choctaws have it, when one runs with wolves, one wears their fur."

"Sorry. I remain what I am. I'll fight with the weapons I've outlined—in my natural pelt."

Gabriel rose at last, and strolled to the rail. For a long moment he stared downstream without speaking. "So that's your gauche resolve for tomorrow. I'll leave you with two thoughts for that same tomorrow, Toby. In spite of your chest thumping now you're lonely, and you're afraid."

"You're partly right on both counts. Not that I'll admit it."

"All of us in the back country are both lonely and afraid. It's part of our heritage. We live down the loneliness with our friends, you're luckier than most, there—you've me on one side, Roy on the other—and Sam for over-all brawn. The fear is harder to scotch. *That's* part of every heartbeat on this continent."

"The pioneers would whirl in their graves to hear that."

"What pioneer wasn't frightened in his loneliness? All the more glory to his memory if he fought that fear down and hung on. We're *all* still pioneers, you know, the worst tidewater fop still has a dash of that tribal magic. Now, of course, he's had time and leisure to be afraid of other things. Interlopers, for example. Men like Old Victor, who is now branded a traitor to his class."

"In other words, we'll never join hands, really."

"Not until we face down that fear together. Not until we think of ourselves as a nation instead of thirteen mutually suspicious commonwealths."

"In other words, long live the Darby Company—and confusion to its enemies."

"Precisely," said Gabriel, with his eyes on the widening Savannah. "At least the Darby Company is a revolution that knows what it wants—and why."

"Is that a thought for your next article?"

"It's a thought for the ages," said Gabriel. "In the meantime, you might sit up and take notice. Here's Darbyville."

ii

Standing with Gabriel in the flatboat's snub bow, Toby saw that the last bend in the Savannah had marked a division between the long, swampy reach upstream and the cleared farmlands below. In that turning the barge had blundered into civilization—or at least its homespun outskirts Flowing smoothly between low bluffs, parting its tan-colored flood here and there to inclose a willow-fringed islet, the river itself seemed tamed, and not too rebellious at its captivity.

On the Carolina side, neat rail fences enclosed a series of small farms, each with its cluster of outbuildings around the inevitable white-sand yard, the compact clapboard dwelling house—deserted in this serene mid-morning, as the whole family toiled to keep abreast the spring planting Toby's upcountry eye noted instantly that these were sharecropped sections, no more prosperous than usual He noted, too, that more than one dooryard had gone back to grass. The fields themselves were bristling with palmettoes here and there—mute evidence of a war whose scars had not yet healed.

Here on the Georgia side, as the flatboat nuzzled in for her landing, the picture was brighter, more active As far as his eye could range, tobacco mounds dotted the rich, well-harrowed land Slaves by the scores toiled with hoe and rake to start that most finicking of crops on its complex round from earth to drying barn The barns themselves, like oversized markers on a giant's checkerboard, stood on their stilted legs here and there—empty, now that next autumn's crop was barely in the earth, and clean as new pins from their open stone hearths to smoke-stained rooftree

Toby, who had worked out his keep through more than one summer in fields such as these, could see instantly that the vast acreage was well-planned, well-tended Sam Hoyt, sitting motionless on a tall gray mule in its midst, his shrewd eyes marking progress at each point of the compass, did not even look up as they passed, though the flatboat brushed the bank not fifty yards from his vantage point That, too, was part of the picture's dedication

Darbyville itself—and the flatboat's bowline had already slapped down wetly on its dock—was an anticlimax at first a low-roofed pattern of barns converging on the wharf and the river like the sticks of some monstrous fan, with a series of wagon tracks laid down between as precisely as ruled lines in geometry As the stern line was cinched home, Toby heard the familiar soft cacophony of Negro voices, the softer rhythm of bare soles in dust and mud

The decks were aswarm again with Darby stevedores. Billy, who had a family to visit in Darbyville, had gone over the side long ago—with a parting wave—to lose himself in a dark jungle of arms and laughter A tall overseer in sweat-stained work clothes had already shouted a greeting from the nearest warehouse door.

"Which of you gentlemen is Thatch?"

Gabriel slapped Toby's bare shoulder resoundingly as he darted from gunwale to wharf. "Don't tell me you'd like to change places. I'm aware of that. Roy's meeting you in Savannah. You needn't face the dragons alone"

"Perhaps I'll call for another horse, and come regardless. If this is to be our first money crop——"

"Sam will report adequately tomorrow. So will I, via the *Mercury*."

"I've worked more tobacco hills than you and Sam combined"

"No doubt, my friend But it's still Sam's job to oversee the planting, and mine to paint a rosy picture of same in my columns, if only to confound our enemies *Your* job, if I may make so bold, is to fortify our headquarters without delay."

Toby yielded on that note and watched his friend stride into the haze of red-clay dust that marked the joining of warehouses and fields He felt suddenly alone, with no strength to fight down his loneliness—and an irrational, rising panic. Loneliness and fear are the enemies, Gabriel had said; admitting that wisdom, he felt himself ringed by hostile eyes, teased by mocking laughter—though the quay was empty, now that the last Negro had padded ashore with his load, empty save for the tall overseer, who continued to stare back at him with a countryman's empty, friendly grin.

"Savannah-bound, sir?"

The question brought him back to himself, helping him to banish that last wild impulse to flee backward in time, into the heart of the world he had known. Later, he would remember how carefully the fellow had watched him, from the first moment of the flatboat's mooring—how he had held back his question until now, when the stern lines were already cast away Later still he would remember the first stirring of the shadow within the warehouse, and wonder For the present, it was enough to answer with a nod, to stare hard at the girl walking from warehouse to sunlight

She walked with an easy country stride, swinging her knotted brogues in one hand, letting her bare feet stir the dust of the wharf as she lifted her face and smiled Toby felt his heart somersault with that smile. Though the face was too pert for beauty, though the smiling mouth was too generous, he

could not remember when he had seen a prettier girl—or one more confident of her charm. Her simple homespun, pinched at the waist with a broad band of home-cured pigskin, revealed a figure that was slender at the right places, voluptuously full in others, and rather more of proud, high breasts than was good for a young man's peace of mind. Just in time Toby pulled back from his inventory to match her greeting. Hers was the earth-born smile that began and ended in her eyes. It was a long time since a girl had smiled at him with such disarming candor.

"*She's* Savannah-bound too," said the overseer. "If the gentleman would be agreeable to a passenger——"

"Why not? There's room to spare."

She was aboard as he spoke—lithe as a cat that knows its destination and means to arrive there at all hazards With that leap her sunbonnet fell back from her head, exposing copper curls that framed her face in a hoydenish halo Her eyes still clung to his—though hers was a boldness without malice—a calm assurance that her welcome was real.

Later, he would remember the sudden hush on the wharf as the flatboat swung into the current, and how the Negro stevedores had swallowed their banter to the last man, and dropped their work to stare How quickly the overseer had vanished among the pyramids of empty tobacco hogsheads at the warehouse door. . . . For the moment he was too pleased by this sudden acquisition to notice backgrounds.

The girl said, easily enough, "I'm Dolly Lake. And you?"

Her voice matched her manner. both direct and friendly, it was never offensively bold A soft, drawling, country voice that went with the dry, acrid scent of palmettoes in August, the singsong call of the farmer to his plow mule, the whisper of pines against a pale evening sky. Toby turned quickly away from its invitation, glad of the necessity of handing her from the gunwale to afterdeck. With one simple question she had brought back the Georgia he knew and loved. The lump in his throat was as real as those memories

"Dr Kent," he managed at last He was furious at the huskiness, surely the wench would mistake nostalgia for lust. "Dr. Tobias Kent of Savannah Your servant, Dolly."

If the girl resented the familiarity, she gave no sign Watching her swing up the flatboat's cluttered deck, he leaned against a stack of lumber for an instant, breathing in the acerb freshness of the resin, even as his eyes enjoyed the free roll of her thighs under flowing homespun Without so much as touching her, he was aware that Dolly Lake neither wore nor needed stays That he could probably embrace her at will simply by crossing to her side.

There was no real yearning in that knowledge. Like the clean aroma of the fresh-cut lightwood, her presence was more tonic than teasing.

The girl said quite calmly. "I didn't have to ask, of course. You *had* to be Dr. Kent. Even if you're the first doctor I've seen in his pelt."

He reddened a little under her glance, and hoped that his tan would cover that schoolboy tendency to blush that still plagued him at times Had her eyes been tender hands, caressing the hard brown planes of his naked chest and shoulders, Dolly Lake could hardly have made her interest more unmistakable "Mr Thatch warned me about my shirt," he said. "I'm afraid I'm still a backwoodsman at heart."

"Mr. Thatch—if you'll excuse the liberty, Doctor—was born to pursue unprotected women with and without his shirt. That's why I waited to show myself."

"You know him, then?"

"Enough to be sure he isn't to be trusted with a girl," she said, with that same engaging pertness As she spoke, she put a hand on his shoulder and vaulted easily to a nest of bales in the shadow of the high gunwale. "What's more, he knows I know."

"What takes you to Savannah, Dolly?"

"I'm employed at Sangaree," said Dolly. "By Mrs Nancy Darby Gregory. You have visited there, of course?"

"As it happens, I'm new to Savannah."

"And new to Mrs Gregory?"

"I'm afraid she's also a pleasure I've denied myself too long"

"And why d'you say that, Doctor?"

"Why not, since you're in her service?"

He got up with the words, moving slowly, to give her whatever opportunity she chose. When she did not stir, he leaned forward into her nest of bales, prisoning her neatly with an elbow against each of her soft, full thighs With that strategic advance, he noted that she had chosen their battleground as carefully as he. Protected as they were by the seven-foot gunwale and by the towering stacks of lumber amidships, they could not be observed by either of the sweeps on the flatboat's high stern True, the mirror of the river made a blinding arc just ahead, but its surface, naked as a lake in some prehistoric world, was no threat to dalliance

"I thought *you* could be trusted, Doctor," she said, demurely enough. "That's why I asked passage."

"Aren't you trusting me now?"

To save him, he did not know which pleased him more, the steel in her voice or the slow, inviting pout of her lower lip

Still holding her prisoner with the hard compulsion of his elbows, he lifted both forearms, until his hands could enclose her pliant waist His guess, he noted joyfully, had been quite accurate. there was nothing between him and Dolly now but that single sheath of homespun.

"If my trust is misplaced, sir——"

He did not kiss her, after all Gabriel had explained that Darbyville was three good hours from Savannah by river, even at floodtide, there would be time enough for kisses, and better, when they had lunched Instead, he found that he had swung Dolly lightly from sacking to deck, and, with an arm still around her, had walked her to the loading hatch to watch the slow brown purl of the Savannah beneath their cutwater.

"You did not misplace your trust, Dolly On the contrary, you'll find me a gentleman of sorts—if you'll answer in kind."

He laughed aloud as her eyes flashed an answer to his challenge "If that means you don't consider me a lady——"

"You and yours are the only true ladies I've known," he said gravely. "Will that answer content you?"

"Me and mine?"

"Girls who are country-bred Girls with the wisdom of the earth, who are not afraid to meet their menfolks on equal terms I've already confessed I'm a country boy—bound on a rather strange adventure "

"I've heard about that venture of yours," she said, with that same baffling calm

"Never mind that now. Tell me of yourself first. How long have you been in service?"

"Since I can remember. My father himself was articled to the old Darby—the one that died awhile ago in the North. We lived in the high prairie back of Darbyville, on the tobacco land called Cagle Hundred "

Toby nodded Cagle Hundred was one of the Darbys' oldest holdings, and one of the richest "You went to Old Victor's schools, then?"

"Until the eighth year, yes Then to Sangaree."

Again he nodded Old Victor's regime for the daughters of his tenants included that much mandatory schooling before they were permitted to go the fields—or into service He asked his next question cautiously. Dolly's value, as a kind of overture to his battle with Dolly's mistress, was growing by the moment

"Did you go abroad with her, when war came?"

"To Nassau, yes It broke her heart to leave Sangaree, but her husband insisted. If you ask me, Doctor, George Gregory was the Tory, not she Course there are folks in Savannah who say different today, but——"

"I'm glad you're loyal to your mistress And even happier that you don't consider my questions forward"

"No more forward than yourself, Doctor," said Dolly Lake—and moved, with complete aplomb out of the circle of his arm. "Keep on asking. I'll answer those I like and leave the rest alone"

"Why did you come upriver today?"

"To visit my family—or what's left of it."

"Do you travel like this often? You're much too pretty to go about alone"

"A compliment, Doctor—from a connoisseur."

Toby blinked despite himself. Somehow, he would not have expected a girl from Cagle Hundred to use a French noun with an all-but-flawless accent. Dolly's next words explained that adequately enough

"French officers were still quartered at Sangaree when we returned Naval officers from the Comte d'Estaing's squadrons I found I could repulse them better if I learned their language—enough to curse them, at least"

"Assez bien pour dire 'non'?"

"Assez bien pour ça," she said—and avoided his questing arm.

"You still haven't answered my question. How d'you dare go about alone?"

Dolly shrugged "I enjoy being alone sometimes"

"Including the risk?"

"Perhaps I'm not risking as much as you think," she said "I'm sure you're not as wicked as you pretend"

"I'm not wicked in the least I only want to—shall I say, enjoy what you enjoy?" He spoke no more than the truth—the pleasure he took in her artful withdrawal was quite honest

Dolly danced away on light feet, giving him another chance to admire bare brown calves in the balletlike swirl of her wide skirt. This time she ran straight forward and settled on the stanchion just inside the bow, where she sat hugging her knees, as though daring him to follow. But he was wise enough to play the game her way now. Settling, in the shade of the high-stacked lumber, he regarded her gravely—letting his eyes ask forgiveness to a point

"Are you Mrs Gregory's personal maid?"

"Her kitchenmaid. Don't lift me above my station. First assistant to Monsieur Fichte, her cook"

"But you see her often?"

"I serve her chocolate in the mornings and confer with her on menus Would you like to know how you'll dine tonight? I can tell you, to the last course, unless she's changed her mind."

"I'd prefer a picture of what I'm going to meet."

"A picture of my mistress—or her world?"

"Both—if it isn't too much to ask "

"I'm afraid it's far too much, Doctor—since we are still strangers "

"Stick to facts, then You say your mistress is—planning to wine and dine me this evening " He turned the picture over in his mind for a moment, forgetting Dolly's nearness, and the piquant challenge of that nearness "Surely I'm not to journey to Sangaree my first night in Savannah?"

"Mrs Gregory is in town now At Wright Square—with Monsieur Fichte established in the kitchen The young Mrs Darby insisted on borrowing him for tonight's soirée "

"So Mrs Darby is dining me—not Mrs Gregory " He closed his eyes again, and tried hard to bring back Martha's dangerous presence Strangely enough, the image of the woman he had never seen was far more distinct in his mind's eye An icy beauty, with ash-blond curls piled in a fantastic tiara and eyes like a winter fiord Eyes that melted, ever so slightly, when they noted that he could bow over a lady's hand as adequately as any marquis

"Mrs Gregory has been often in Savannah this past month, to see her lawyer "

He came back to realities, not too happily "Because of me?"

Dolly Lake cast down her eyes "Who am I to answer that, Doctor?"

"Does she always reside at Wright Square when she's in town?"

"Where else? It was her second home, before the new Mrs Darby came " Toby chuckled as she cast down her eyes again, he had not missed the flash of anger

"Loyalty is a good feeling, Doll Don't be ashamed of it. Obviously your mistress would resent the young Mrs Darby. As much as *she* resents your mistress."

"What right have you to that assumption?"

"Doctors are students of humanity too— or they should be I've noted more than once that two queens cannot occupy a single throne Especially in as tight a kingdom as Savannah "

"How can you judge Savannah, when you've yet to visit it?"

"Be honest, Doll Do *you* prefer Savannah to Cagle Hundred?"

"I prefer Sangaree to both "

He stared at her in earnest, then, and wondered how much she really knew of the Darby Company—or of the bitter warfare that had attended its birth Still wondering, he let the next question escape, uncensored

"Who do you think I am, Doll?"

"The Darby's chief factor," she said calmly "More important than Sam Hoyt—since you fought through the war with Old Victor, and Sam was left home to forage They do say you're a good doctor, and a good organizer too That's why the old man hired you And wrote it into his will that you're to *stay* hired—no matter what the heirs think "

She had spoken in a flat voice, as though she were rehearsing a series of well-known facts aloud Now she cocked her bright head and smiled at him disarmingly "Forgive me if you're more important, Doctor. I wouldn't know "

But Toby had regained his good humor "Put it that way, if you like I *am* in Savannah to put the Darby house in order. To make what money I can "

"Just what they were saying in the kitchen only yesterday," said Doll triumphantly "A big overseer—bigger than anyone in the Darby business Bigger, even, than Old Victor."

"No one could be bigger than Old Victor."

He saw her eyes change with his words For an instant the mockery vanished from their clear depths Incredibly, there was a hint of tears in her voice when she spoke again

"They say you can give orders, and people must jump, from Miss Nancy down "

"Who told you that? Miss Nancy?"

"Everyone is saying it. From the market stalls to the finest salon on Bull Street " The challenge had already come back to her eyes "Everyone but Miss Nancy. She won't admit there's a word of truth in it *She* says that she'll refurnish Sangaree and take her new husband there in the fall, just as she planned Yes, and pay for it out of Darby funds." Again her voice broke He was sure of the tears on her lashes now. Sure that these slim brown fingers could claw as well as caress, when this mood was on her And he chuckled inwardly at that knowledge A battle of that sort would add spice to the game he planned—after their second bottle of Marques de Riscal by the latticed after house

"Why don't you go on, Doll? Or have you said too much?"

"Don't say you weren't warned," she murmured, in a quick, hoarse whisper.

"Shall I give you a message for your mistress?"

"Never mind You were quite right· I've said too much now. Who am I to warn a gentleman to walk warily?"

"It's a warning I might heed, if it came from you." He lifted her gently by the elbows as he spoke, giving her every chance to resist This time there was no tension between them as his mouth closed on hers, no sense of barriers, as her body seemed on the point of yielding itself completely, even as it

broke free of his embrace. He let her escape, exulting in this first victory

"Thank you, Doll"

"For what?" Her aplomb shocked him a little, his male certainty wilted as he realized that she had accepted his kiss expertly rather than returned it.

"For treating me as a friend," he said, as steadily, as he could "When I'm still a stranger."

"Shall I prove I'm a real friend, and cook your lunch?"

"Only if you'll let me help"

"Food is my job," she said "Moneymaking is yours. Let's keep out of each other's way"

He did not join in her laughter as she whisked into the galley. His sense of power had vanished as though it had never been. At the moment he was conscious only of an obscure satisfaction that Billy, that priceless bivouac cook, always kept a spotless kitchen

Even if he took her now—and he could do no less, if only for the sake of pride—it would be a conquest without meaning. If Nancy Gregory's serving wench could best him in a duel of love, to say nothing of a duel of wits, how could he face the wench's mistress?

He found that he was swearing like any sergeant major—and taking small comfort in his curses—as he brought the first ice-cold bottle of wine overside on its deep towline Biting out the cork, and drinking deep, he fumbled for a return of optimism—conscious only of Doll's soft-voiced humming in the galley Positive, now, that he must possess her, if only as a symbol of success to come.

iii

The rain came without warning, as they were uncorking the second bottle of Marques de Riscal, in the cool, latticed shade of the after house It came with deceptive softness—more like fine steam than rain, as though the drenching heat of mid-afternoon had condensed into another element And then, in a twinkling, the Savannah changed color like a sick chameleon—from tan to poison green, from green to cold gray Laced with whitecaps at the shoals, as the wind drove its storm cloud down the wide valley, peppered with the dancing pennies of the downpour, the river was in no way sinister to Toby He had watched too many of these rain squalls rage over Georgia—cooling the parched earth as they passed, giving the back-country folk a chance to cool their own skins in its hissing violence

He was not surprised to hear the two sweeps whoop for

joy overhead, and knew they had merely held the barge steady in the current to take the shower on their own bare backs Just in time he remembered that a Savannah gentleman must keep to cover, and pulled back to smile down at Dolly, knowing that she had sensed his mood

"How long since you've run naked on a sandbar and let a rain squall sting your pelt?"

"Too long," he murmured, a bit sadly. "Speak for yourself, Doll"

"I knew that Clay Creek was backward," she said. "I'd never heard that its girls walked naked in the rain"

He refused to rally to the teasing, oppressed as he was by the same malaise that had troubled him all during lunch.

It was a spiritual lowering, with no relation to the miraculous meal that Dolly's deft hands had conjured from the pots in Billy's galley Now, as she offered him a bowl of plump peaches,—the fruit had come from her own handbag—he knew that she was watching him shrewdly—that she was wondering at the slowness of his approach He did not rise to her unspoken question. At the moment he was not too troubled at the precious miles slipping under the barge's rain-drenched bow

"We'll be at the Darby dock in thirty minutes, Doctor. Does the thought depress you?"

He looked up quickly—disturbed again at her strange clairvoyance "How d'you know?"

"By the Kirby place on the bluff When you see that colonnade ahead, you can set your water clock"

He peered through the swirling skirts of rain, startled by the great ghost-white house that loomed on the riverbank, above its spreading apron of lawn. Framed though it was in the inevitable backdrops of palmetto and yellow pine, the Kirby place was unmistakably an urban outpost Its squat white columns and wide windows offered their own warning. There would be other watching houses as the river opened into its tidal reach The seduction of Dolly Lake, if that was the proper word, must take place quickly, or not at all

Was it possible that she, too, was counting the minutes that remained, and yearning for more of his kisses? He felt his good humor come back as he considered that warm probability.

"More wine, Doll?"

"Have a glass of your own first," she said "It may make you more cheerful. Or, at the very least, more talkative"

He poured the cold white nectar into one of Billy's pannikins and swallowed it in two deep draughts He was a bit shocked to remember that she had matched him, glass for

glass, and still looked sober as a Monday-morning professor.

"Perhaps wine really makes you morose, Doctor. Or is it I?"

"Never you, Doll," he said, a bit thickly. "Even though you wouldn't give back my kiss"

"That was all of two hours ago. Surely you wouldn't brood for two hours on my—shall I say, my lack of ardor?"

"Do you lack ardor now?"

"I suppose it goes deeper than that," she said, ignoring his question as she ignored his hand on her shoulder. "You looked forward to—to one thing when I came aboard Or, should I say, the kind of girl you've enjoyed before? Now you've found another, you're sulking"

"I'm not in the least disappointed," he said, and let his hand glide smoothly downward.

She did not move, though he could feel her flesh stir instantly under his gently questing fingers To save him, he could not tell if she were furious, or merely acquiescent, when he bent to press a light kiss on the point of attack he had just opened. He knew only that her heart was thudding, that the cleft between her breasts burned with a fire all its own

"Not in the least disappointed, Doll. Are you?"

"I rather expected this," she said, with the same infuriating calm "To be honest, Doctor, I'm surprised you waited so long Judging by your reputation——"

"What do you know of my reputation?"

"More than you can imagine. We know a great deal of you in Savannah. How you worked your way into Victor Darby's life How you took what you wanted from him, with the last breath he drew——"

She had spoken the words slowly, now, as she continued to wait in the circle of his arm, her eyes dropped to the hand that had prisoned her breast Had a snake nested there Dolly Lake could hardly have regarded it with more loathing She did not fling it from her—she was, it seemed, above that She did not even look up when he stepped back of his own accord First he was too startled to speak. Then anger flooded him and he felt his last shred of caution snap.

"So you knew me when you came aboard at Darbyville?"

"Why else would I come?"

"You *planned* it that way?"

"Of course We'd been told at Sangaree just when you'd come down river We knew that Mr Thatch would go ashore and let you finish the trip alone It seemed a heaven-sent opportunity to—how shall I say it? To study you at your worst?"

"And d'you find me a total monster?"

She answered him without words· it took all his self-control to stand, unflinching, under the blaze of her eyes "I won't say you encouraged me, Doll That would hardly be gentlemanly—as you'd use the term But you did know I'd make love to you. What man wouldn't, with that face and figure?"

"Save your honey for the trollops, Doctor!"

He went on regardless, letting his voice rise only a little. "Admit you knew what would happen when you came aboard Admit you made no real effort to deflect my—my advances"

"I'll admit it gladly How else could I draw you out?"

"So your mistress sent you to spy Is that it?"

"To report, you mean"

"Why couldn't she wait? Or come herself?"

"I was proud to take the risk"

He bowed from the waist "Thank you for being afraid, my dear May I ask one more question before I—claim my reward?"

"Reward, Doctor?"

"Surely we're using the same vocabulary now"

"You've made yourself master of the Darby fortune What else is there to conquer?"

But it was his turn to answer without words as he swept her into his arms Molding her body to his own, he let her realize that she was truly a prisoner now She fought with all her strength, her open hand swinging in a crazy circle, slapped him twice across the cheek Toby laughed aloud at this assault on his dominance, and waited, quite calmly, for her lips to lift to his This time Dolly Lake would kiss him of her own accord

"One more question, Doll Why did you confess just now? Why not simply return to your mistress—tell her what little you've learned?"

She did not answer, but he felt her heart pound as though it would burst from her body. And he felt his own heart answer, as that same body, though it struggled still, began to take the shape of his desire

"Shall I sum up your findings, Doll? Tell her that I'm a man like any other That I'll fight on her terms—and prove I'm right Tell her she'd have learned more if she'd come to me honestly—asked her own questions"

"I think we know—all we need to know about you—Doctor" She had almost ceased to struggle now, her breathing, though still stormy, was controlled

"Go on I'm enjoying this too"

"We *know* you're ruthless now. We know you'll go on tak-

ing what you want—whether it's the Darby fortune or a Darby maidservant "

"Is that your speech of surrender?"

"I'll never surrender," she said, in a dying whisper. "You must take me."

"Then you came aboard *hoping* to be taken?"

She did not speak, or raise her eyes Having his answer now, he put her from him as gently as he could.

"So this is your first adventure in love, Doll. Forgive me for not guessing sooner."

"How do you know it's my—my first?"

"By those tears on your cheeks," he said. "I'm not too flattered—even though you were prepared to sacrifice yourself for Mrs Gregory She must be a remarkable mistress to inspire such loyalty."

He had turned away as he spoke, unable to bear the hurt astonishment in her face Hearing her sob behind him, he could not be sure if that sharp intake of breath was inspired by rage or an aftermath of tears But there was no mistaking the slap of her bare soles on the floor as she rushed from the after house into the full beat of the rain

He followed her as fast as booted feet would take him, slipped once on the wet planking of the bow, and paused there, his head still whirling with wine and balked desire. When he heard her laugh, he realized that she had dodged him neatly among the lumber stacks amidships she stood now on the gunwale, shouting a command to the sweeps Her knotted brogues were clutched in one fist, her bundle tossed over a shoulder She looked every inch a rain-wet gipsy who had regained her spirits—and the will to move on.

"Wait, Doll!"

The barge running close to the Georgia bank with the full current behind it, had responded instantly to her order. Already there was barely three yards of chocolate water between gunwale and bank Too startled to call an order of his own, knowing in advance that he could never reach her in time, Toby tried to shout another plea, but no words came As he watched, she leaped from gunwale to land, quitting the flatboat with the same catlike ease she had boarded it He saw her foot slip on the mudsill bank, and hoped she would take a header after all, if only to give him the dubious pleasure of rescuing her But Doll had already clung to a willow branch, tossed shoes and bundle on the green bank above, and swung herself after them

For a moment he found the urge to follow her all but irresistible It would be simple to capture her, there in the tall dog fennel—to take her, as she had expected to be

taken, from the first. He had been sure of that much when he released her. She would hardly thank him if he missed this last chance to overpower her. Or so he reasoned, while the chocolate river widened between barge and bank, while the drum of desire, far from diminishing in his pulses, threatened to fell him with its hard hammer blows. While Doll's swift-running feet—even at the distance, he could hear them rustle through the jungle on the bank—took her from river's edge to the low bluff beyond.

She stood there for a moment against the clearing sky. Toby cupped his hands to shout, but her voice crossed the water first, clear as a mocking bell

"Thank you for your hospitality, Doctor. Sorry I couldn't enjoy it longer"

She was gone with her words, vanishing like a swift dryad in the tangle of water oak and wild grape that crowned the bank He was still staring after her when the barge swung into the last long bend.

A demure Georgia queen on her throne above the tidal reach, crowned with rain-washed sun, Savannah smiled down on him at last.

iv

Savannah was smiling back, just as tranquilly, when he stood at the window of his room on Wright Square an hour later and conned her features one by one Geography would do well enough for a present diversion, he told himself dourly, until he could analyze the impulses that had prompted that strange love duel on the flatboat. Or decide what brand of curses would best fit Nancy Darby Gregory when they met at last

His arrival at the Darby wharf below the bluff, his progress to the imposing Georgian house on the square, had been anticlimactic—and vaguely soothing Roy, it developed, had been away since morning on a country call, Roy's majordomo, the same Jubal who had served him so nobly in Edinburgh and had now risen to the post of butler, had met the flatboat with two slaves in tow and a barrow to trundle Dr. Kent's trunks along the steep ramp that zigzagged up the face of Savannah's bluff. Jubal had presided gravely over the newcomer's climb to that vast, airy esplanade known as The Bay, which fronted the river harbor, and the maze of islands beyond.

Jubal had escorted him, no less gravely, down the broad, mulberry-shaded length of Bull Street to the slatted wooden sidewalk of Wright Square, placed almost geometrically in

the town's center. It had been a muted journey, strangely soothing to jangled nerves—a memory compounded of brick walls muffled deep in leaves, of the whisper of boots in sand; of soft-voiced Negroes in a huge, tin-roofed market place; of a peace that went deeper than the mid-afternoon hush that brooded on these sun-warmed roofs like a benediction.

Toby stepped through the high portal window of his bedroom to the balcony that boxed it and stared, for a brooding moment, at the town below.

People were beginning to stir in the streets, now the afternoon was ending, Savannah, said Jubal, followed the custom of its neighbors to the South and observed the siesta hour. That, too, had been a good omen, he had found it appropriate to make his entry down all-but-empty streets, to find that the ladies of Wright Square were not visible at this hour.

From where he stood Savannah's exact Euclidian pattern was even more pronounced a half-dozen squares like their own, the wide, centered ruler of Bull Street balanced on one side by The Bay, on the other by the long green oblong of the Trustees' Garden East and west the stockades that had withstood the long wartime sieges were still intact Time and the green magic of the town's gardeners had been kind to the gougings inflicted here and there by the cannon of contending armies

For a long time he continued to stare at the open country to the west and the rutted road that snaked through the checkerboards of outlying farms into the blue vastness of the back country He wondered if Doll was still trudging the last hard mile to the town's western gate—and what she would say when they met again Oddly enough, he found that he could almost look forward to that meeting

He could summon her clearly, even now, simply by closing his eyes—summon her in all her tall, lithe beauty, from the coppery aureole of her hair to the strong grip of her bare toes on the flatboat's gunwale He could not fit her into the polished framework of this house on Wright Square.

Perhaps he would meet her in the morning, when he strolled down the central stairwell for his coffee Or later, when he took the air in the kitchen gardens, like a wary hunter more than willing to give his covey an even chance. Or later still, if today's battle had really shaken her, somewhere in the Turkey-carpeted maze of this upstairs hall. There was time enough to explore this rich and bewildering mansion tomorrow—time to face the ledgers, and the lawyers, and the enigma of Nancy Darby.

Time to face the fact that this pervasive ache at his heart would not ease until he had taken Dolly Lake in his arms

again and found her willing lips, and asked her pardon for the game he had played so cavalierly—and so clumsily—aboard the flatboat

Perhaps, if he questioned Jubal, he could learn something of the girl's status at Wright Square. Obviously, if she came in from the outside, as a kind of liaison between Nancy and the kitchen, she would have made her presence felt. It would be natural enough to mention that they had come down together from Darbyville But when the hall door sighed open and Jubal appeared, faultless as ever, his frog-like body choked in satin splendor for the soirée, his moon-face all but engulfed in a gigantic neckcloth, Toby felt the words choke in his throat

Dolly Lake would reveal herself in her own way—at her own time Until then he would throw himself on her mercy

"Mr. Roy will see you now, Doctor. Mr Roy requests that you take a glass of sherry in his upstairs parlor before he greets his guests"

The major-domo stepped forward on that pronouncement, clapping his pudgy dark hands like a caricature of a ballet master The two room slaves, who had been removing the last traces of Toby's bath, snapped to attention as one man Without visible command they leaped to their respective tasks—one, to hand Toby fresh glacé gloves from the highboy, the other, to whisk forward with Toby's best London coat between reverent fingers

With the tight velvet collar snug against his stock, Toby paused for a foot-to-crown check at the cheval glass Black pumps, as dainty as a dancing master's, with square gold buckles fit for a prince of the blood Stockings of the finest raw silk, direct from Paris Breeches, of leaf-green satin, tighter than his skin The absurdly long waistcoat, sweeping down almost to his gold-buckled knees, was a thing of beauty, its swan's-down smoothness embellished with a swooning war of monkeys and parakeets done in petit point The cascade of white lace at the throat, the correct, dead-black sheen of the coat itself, completed the hand-tailored symphony nicely Only the natural hair, tied in a grosgrain ribbon, betrayed the fact that this was a back-country boy and not the veteran of a hundred levees

Toby grinned at himself a moment more and wondered again at his assurance By all the rules he should have felt a monstrous masquerader But happiness persisted as he followed Jubal into the shadowed white-and-red hallway

From where he stood the tall corridor seemed endless His own quarters, including a roomy *bureau* that Jubal had said would be his private study, when he had chosen the fur-

nishings, stood at the garden end, the street end, and the stairwell that descended to the formal living rooms below, seemed remote as a sunshot dream. He walked toward it slowly, counting the great mahogany rectangles that were the portals to other bedrooms, shining with vast brass hasps, tented with neo-classic overdoors intricate with white scroll-work. Halfway down he was sure he heard a woman's voice in one of the rooms, and wondered if it were Nancy Gregory. Perhaps Doll had moved on nimble feet. Perhaps she was reporting to her mistress even now, and giggling over certain details . . . He brushed the image aside and charged on.

At the stairwell he looked down briefly at the oak-lined serenity of the square, beginning to go faintly blue with evening. A carriage had just halted at the block; he breathed sharply as a lady in a vast bell of lace and taffeta sailed into view—with the assistance of a dandy in canary-yellow smallclothes and a claw hammer finicking as a tube of black silk. Laughter, both male and female, drifted up the stair-well to remind him of the ordeal he would soon be facing. Again he squared his shoulders against the threat, and, at a deferential gesture from Jubal, turned with the circle of the stair rail to enter the master's private parlor.

The small upstairs room was cheerfully intimate, from the wink of the decanter on the Chippendale table to the dance of flame at the pine knots on the small black marble hearth. Toby walked to the flame and held his hands out gratefully to its warmth; for the first time he was conscious of the slight chill that had come to Savannah with the evening sea breeze—a reminder that winter still lingered just over the horizon from this sun-steeped land. He did not turn as Jubal backed out with the same flawless deference and drew the door shut behind him. He looked up only when an inner door whisked open and Martha Darby moved toward him.

Knowing instantly that she had planned this meeting—with her usual competence—he was too startled to budge. Watching the approach of her full red lips, he made no attempt to avoid them. Her kiss was all he remembered, and more. So, for that matter, was Martha herself—a rose-and-gold vision in that circle of firelight. Her powdered hair was piled high about a tiara of brilliants. A rope of pearls, threading her low-cut bodice, emerged about the opulent curve of her right breast, only to disappear in the foam of lace below.

Martha, the perfect end product of her long planning, was a Darby now. A lady, in every sense of a misused word, and a *femme du monde* who could pick up an old lover at the precise moment she wished, and mold his ardor at will.

Or so she must reason now, he told himself, as he drew

back to admire her. And he chuckled inwardly as he remembered how wildly he had wanted her once, and how narrowly he had escaped her one afternoon in Glasgow

"It's been a long time, Martha"

"Too long," she said, and held out her arms to him again

He kissed her once more, long and hard—knowing in advance that they were safe from prying eyes This, after all, was an old friend's greeting The fact that these same friends had been lovers once had no bearing now After all, the emancipation of one lover was complete—thanks to events aboard a flatboat in the Savannah He could kiss his best friend's wife and still keep faith with Roy

Or so he reasoned, as he drew away a second time, a bit puzzled at her laughter

"The Puritan soul in the pagan body," she said. "A strange Georgian you turned out to be, Toby Kent"

"What do you mean?" The question was instinctive, for he understood her perfectly

"You think I'm tempting you all over again. Actually that was only welcome—and forgiveness"

"*Forgiveness*, Martha?"

"Of course For your bad taste in spurning me a few years ago Is your memory as good as mine?"

"My memory is uncomfortably accurate," he said slowly "You were married then, I believe You're married now."

"Married indeed, my dear. And content that my wild oats are behind me. As a successful doctor, will you admit that a lady may sow wild oats, too, and live them down?"

"Heaven grant that you're speaking truth this time"

"It's gospel, Toby. I'm fortunate in my marriage and happy in my position here Be honest Have you ever seen me look better?"

"Never" It was true enough, the war's end had brought Martha Darby to a full, exotic blooming Like too-sweet fruit, he added instantly, wondering how she had spent those years in Havana How many men had assisted in that blooming, and chuckled over their wine as they remembered her favors?

"You've ripened too," said Martha "In your own stern way. I'd add that you're handsomer than I remember you, but that might turn your head And we've things to discuss before we go down"

"Aren't your guests arriving now?"

"Nancy will greet them," said Martha "Remember, this is her house too—thanks to our patriarch's will" There was a thin edge to her voice now, though she brushed bitterness aside with her next words "Never mind Nancy She's only in town to inspect you Tomorrow she'll withdraw to Sangaree

and plan her next move against you Or should I say against us all?"

"I think I should meet my Nemesis now," he said firmly, and turned toward the hall Martha stopped him with her voice

"You'll want weapons, Toby All I can supply Remember, I've been in Savannah a whole year. I've watched her the moment she returned from Nassau Assuming, as a matter of course, that a Tory's widow could resume her old place, and no questions asked"

"If I'm to believe Gabriel, Mrs. Gregory has done just that"

"Cool as you please," said Martha "Just as she's invaded *my* home tonight, and received my guests as though they were her own Just as she'll go before Judge Armstrong tomorrow, with that foppish fiancé of hers and demand that the will be set aside"

"Will you back her in that, Martha?"

"And spoil the chance of a lifetime for you and Roy?"

He watched her narrowly, still puzzled by the vehemence of her avowals "So your offer to help me was quite genuine?"

"Didn't you believe my letter? Each word was from the heart"

"Did you write it because you admired Victor Darby's intentions? Or because you wish to see his daughter humbled?"

"A bit of both, if we must be frank Five thousand souls are involved in this company's fortunes, if you'll count blacks with whites Country people like ourselves, Toby" She walked to the hearth as she spoke, and smiled up at her superbly groomed image in the small round mirror above it "Why shouldn't I defend them against one woman if I can? And why shouldn't I help you, as you've helped me?"

"I never helped you, Martha You've made your own luck always"

"You could have stopped Roy with a word once," she said "Thanks to your silence, I'm the first lady of Savannah today Or will be, when we've deposed Mrs Gregory"

"For the last time, let's forget the past *That's* a sealed book, I trust If you can make Roy happy now——"

"I can make Roy anything I choose," she said "Roy's an easy husband to handle while he has his laboratory and you to lean on"

"Where is he, by the way?"

"A few steps down the hall In Mary Bristol's bedroom."

She offered him her too-familiar smile as he arched a brow. "A guest, *and* a patient Need I add the last?"

"You receive patients here, then?"

Martha shrugged "Can we do less? Mary will be Nancy's sister-in-law someday"

"So we're back to Nancy."

"You'll always return to Nancy, until you've settled your account with her."

"May I do that in my own way?"

"So you've a plan, after all?"

"I mean to carry out her father's will to the letter—whether or not she'll become a partner in the venture. After all, I've two years to prove that I'm honest."

"What if she breaks the will tomorrow?"

"Old Victor was of sound mind when he wrote it. We can all witness that."

"As interested parties, yes Nancy's lawyer-betrothed has found others who'll swear to the contrary Officers from the old Ranger regiment Men who are prepared to hate you on sight, now the war's over."

Toby struck fist to palm. It was hard to admit that brother officers might turn against him Yet he remembered that Old Victor had recruited most of his staff in Georgia. Probably more than one of these cockerels hated him, because of his humble origin They would feel free to express that hatred now in a way that would hurt him most.

"Surely Roy's testimony will count for something"

"Many people here think of Roy as an extension of your shadow More consider him a renegade for marrying me"

"Be that as it may, Mrs Gregory has every right to contest her father's will We must fight her as best we can"

"Precisely. I think she can be stopped now, if you'll do as I say." Martha's eyes flashed; the rope of pearls, hardly whiter than the flesh beneath, stirred as her breasts rose proudly If this is play-acting, thought Toby, she's enjoying it to the hilt

Aloud he said only, "Servant, Mistress Darby. To a point, at least."

"Have it out with her tonight, then. Warn her that she must walk warily."

"We'll need more than that, I fear."

"Say that I know all I need to know—and more—of her relations with Felix Pagnol Say that I'll expose them to the world unless she drops her suit"

"And who on earth is Pagnol?"

"Captain Felix Pagnol, late of d'Estaing's staff A well-polished gentleman who lingers on in Savannah for reasons

of his own. A gentleman who is constantly in the widow Gregory's company. Savannah believes that he's no more than a good friend of the late George Gregory. It happens I know better."

Toby fell back a pace, startled as much by her vehemence as by the news itself. "Surely Mrs. Gregory has a right to her friends.

"Pagnol made his headquarters in Havana when the Revolution was at its height," said Martha "Pagnol was a privateerman then, under orders to the King of France."

"Surely that's not illegal "

"It's illegal to have a foot in three camps. I can prove that he took prizes from both Boston and Nassau as well as Havana "

"The war's over now, Martha "

"Not for such men, Toby. Their war goes on forever. They hunted under another flag during the Revolution. They hunt under skull and crossbones today "

"So you're prepared to state that this French captain's a pirate, and Mrs Gregory is his accomplice ashore?"

"To her face, if need be. Somehow, I think the threat will be enough."

He had watched her narrowly as she poured out this invective. To save him, he could not be sure if she were improvising or plotting desperately in his behalf.

"Be frank, Martha. How much of this can you really prove?"

"Enough to frighten her off "

"The fact that this man engaged in privateering is no disgrace How else did the Darby fleet make its wartime fortune?"

"The war's ended now, and merchantmen are still lost every day off these coasts "

"So you'd accuse Pagnol, because of his own war record?"

"Why else would he linger in Savannah? Why is he constantly with Nancy?"

"Perhaps he's giving young Bristol a run for his money. Can't we sit back and watch the fight?"

Martha shrugged "So my offer is rejected?"

"Blackmail is an ignoble weapon, my dear. I prefer to fight in the open."

"Let's hope you won't regret your choice "

"Be that as it may, isn't it time I faced my enemies in the flesh? Surely the lot of 'em are downstairs."

"All but the Bristols," she said. "They have their reasons for keeping clear, as of now."

He bowed her through the parlor door into the hall "If you must speak in riddles, Martha——"

"Roy will explain that last. You wanted to consult with Roy, didn't you?"

She left him without another word Entering the curve of the stairwell, she drifted rather than walked down the noble treads into a babble of voices and laughter He stood immobile, puzzled by that curt withdrawal But Martha paused on the landing and threw him a last look—a pause, he noted instantly, that displayed the ivory perfection of her shoulders admirably.

"It's the fourth door on your right," she said "You might tell him to hurry The two partners will make their entrance side by side That's as it should be, isn't it?"

Her smile, with all its implications, followed him in his retreat down the hall Roy's voice called permission to his knock as he paused under the designated overdoor Roy's pale, intent face, lifted in the candlelight within the shuttered room, was a steadying note in this strange household Roy's casual, friendly handshake completed the picture, making him at home instantly They might almost have been back in Fort Washington again, about to inspect a ward together The girl on the bed between and the tall, white-wigged slave with the candle scone were the only jarring notes

Roy spoke without turning "I'll take the candles, Daniel, you may go" He set the light on a table beside the four-poster and smiled again at Toby. "As you see, I've put her under a light opiate She's had a bad afternoon, my guess is she'll have a worse evening"

Toby bent over the patient. Slight as a ghost in the vast white desert of the bed, Mary Bristol hardly seemed to breathe Magnolia-pale, with blue moons below her closed lashes, she seemed to wait, supine, for death to claim her.

"What's the trouble here?"

"Perhaps you'll confirm my diagnosis, Dr Kent."

Roy had folded back the sheets as he spoke The two doctors worked quietly for a while—a team that functioned instantly without words Still without words, Toby walked to the window as the examination ended and stared down into the square. Carriages were still jockeying for place at the Darby block, for the moment, he could ignore that display for a more immediate problem

"Do I understand that this is *Miss* Mary Bristol?"

"I'm afraid that's the size of it"

"Daughter of our chief competitor?"

"The occasion," said Roy, "has its humorous aspect. However, I don't feel like laughing."

"The girl's at least six week's pregnant."

"At least. That's why she took shelter with Nancy."

"Does her father know she's with child?"

"Bristol knows only that she loves a man he doesn't approve A naval lieutenant named Stanton A decent chap, and something of a hero. But poor——" Roy glanced quickly at Toby, then hurried on "At the moment he's chasing pirates somewhere in the Florida keys They'd planned to marry when he returns Mary is of age and she's determined to defy her father."

"She sounds a classic heroine"

Roy smiled wanly. "Including her impulsiveness, you mean?"

"And her flight to sanctuary. How long has she been here?"

"Only since yesterday. Nancy brought her in from Sangaree when she fell ill I might add that the Bristols are furious we've sheltered her So furious, they refused to attend this party in your honor."

"Somehow I don't think I'll like the Bristols."

"I'm sure you won't The old man's a barnacle of the old school Naturally, he was out for our scalps from the first. He'll have another reason now"

"And Harvey—your sister's fiancé?"

"Nancy has a right to choose her husbands," said Roy. "So far, I haven't endorsed either choice You must see Harvey to believe him, no description could do that coxcomb justice" Roy seemed about to add a footnote to that pronouncement, then resisted the urge. "Don't think I'm being harsh on Nancy She's marrying into the Bristols to consolidate her position *This* girl is marrying for love—if she lives to make her love legal"

Toby turned back to the bed, to test Mary Bristol's thready pulse a second time "Obviously, her pregnancy is going badly. Should we attempt a diagnosis now?"

Roy smiled in earnest "She'll rest quietly for another hour. I think you should diagnose my sister's enmity first. People will say you're afraid if you linger upstairs much longer."

"Why should I be afraid of her?"

"Wait and see," said Roy But it was he, not Toby, who lingered an instant longer "Perhaps I should add that this is the room reserved for Nancy in Father's will She insisted that Mary occupy it until she recovers Nancy herself will sleep at Tondee's Tavern for tonight."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"To prove that she's human," said Roy. "Insisting on this

soirée was only a bit of bravura on her part, in my opinion. Meet her head on, Toby, you will find she's almost as human as you Perhaps even a bit ashamed of that lawsuit she's bringing against the company——" He opened the door on that, letting the last words trail into a whisper The same tall slave, waiting just outside, came forward at his master's nod, to resume his watch at the bedside.

"Shall we go down arm in arm? Or would that seem too studied?"

"Not a bit," said Toby. "Let's show we have the bravura touch too"

But he felt his heart sink for all those brave words as they walked into Nancy Gregory's presence at last There, precisely as he had pictured it on a hundred rainy bivouacs, was the long white-and-gold salon, thronged, now, with silken figures gleaming with gold and grace There, repeated in the great oval mirror above the mantel, were the faces of Savannah's finest A Georgia aristocracy already a half-century old, certain it would endure forever, despite the assaults of commoners There, as he walked into its tight-packed midst, was his own tanned visage, its dark clubbed hair a striking contrast among so many strutting wigs and proud pompadours And there, turning in answer to Roy's greeting, was Nancy Gregory's own proud head, all but blocked from his view by the press around her.

She was laughing as she turned, but her eyes had already found his in the mirror. He knew that he was staring as he had never stared before The tall patrician body, regal as a princess in its flaunting gown of green watered silk, obviously belonged to Nancy Gregory So did the slender hand, jeweled to the last joint, she had just raised to her throat So did the voice Whitehall itself could not have clipped the consonants more expertly All the more shocking then—and he knew instantly that he was more shocked than surprised—to discover that Nancy Gregory was also Dolly Lake, the girl he had all but ravished three hours ago

A girl, it seemed, who could accept the homage of his long stare as easily as though he approached her as a lover, not as a preordained enemy

"Dr Kent—my sister, Mrs. Gregory"

Even as his brain whirled, even as he bent above the hand she offered him, he sensed the sudden hush in the room Instinct told him to speak first, though he strangled in the effort.

"So at last I greet you."

"Is *greet* the proper word, Doctor?"

"That's for you to say," he replied, obscurely proud of

the iron he had forced into his tone He heard Roy chuckle behind him, and permitted himself a small grin as the hush about them deepened Again he broke it boldly "Of course it's you who should greet me, Mrs. Gregory—if greeting's in the air"

"Why else would I be here, Doctor?" He hand still lay in his, cold as the diamonds it bore She withdrew it gently now and placed it on his arm.

"Greetings today, Mrs Gregory? Lawsuits tomorrow?"

Someone gasped from the hall archway—he knew without turning that it was Martha He was doubly sure when he saw Nancy Gregory's eyes narrow and felt her cold fingers tighten on his arm.

"Society has its anomalies, Doctor You'll grow used to ours in time May I present my guests?"

The last pronoun had not been lost on Martha He saw her cheeks flame as they began the slow circuit of the room He watched the frozen groups break into animation as Nancy began claiming them with the glance of a born hostess And he heard Roy's whisper in their wake, as a kind of debonair echo to the proceedings.

"Honors even so far, Toby. Keep a stiff front. We'll best her yet"

Even as he thanked Roy silently for his support, he knew the honors were far from even At the moment Nancy Darby Gregory seemed as invincible as her poise He hoped that Roy would never know how close his sister had come to dishonor that afternoon at his best friend's hands Or how ardently that best friend wished that his violation had been complete.

v

The cavalry colonel who had ridden with Francis Marion, resplendent in a white dress uniform whose revers gleamed like raw ivory, and the black-garbed judge whose name Toby had somehow missed in the welter of introductions faced him patiently, like two aged dogs on the scent Around him the babble of voices had taken over briskly enough Nancy, leaving him with a last sunny smile, had surrendered to her phalanx of gallants once again Watching that surrender over the rim of his companions' small talk, Toby saw that Martha, too, had summoned a polished wolf pack whose attentions were no less ardent

As for Roy, he had merely vanished in the rout Toby did not mind the loss at the moment Keyed to concert pitch, he knew that he could take his part in this graceful cacophony. Sustained by the impending collision with Nancy and

the conviction that he could play his part there as well, he found himself throwing a defiance at the colonel's last question as easily as though he had defied blue-blood officers all his life

"On the contrary, sir I'll never apologize for serving outside Georgia. This *was* a war of liberation, after all Thirteen colonies, fighting as a unit to achieve statehood. Does it matter where one served?"

"There's a question of loyalty, my lad. How d'you define it?"

"The definition is yours, sir I'm all ears"

"I fought as a Georgian, sir I fought only for Georgia. I'll fight again, if any man threatens Georgia's survival. Whether it's a lobsterback, or an agent for this addled Confederation"

"Surely we'll need something stronger than a Confederation if we're to endure"

"England will protect us We're still Britons"

"Some observers feel that England is only waiting to pounce on us again when she's settled with the French"

"Warmongers, sir—rascals who are only happy when they're fighting Hotheads who'd have us occupy Canada and the Floridas the day after tomorrow."

The judge spoke up mildly enough. "Confess this much, Crowther. When you heard that Florida had returned to Spain, you were all for investing St Augustine"

"That's no more than logic, Armstrong. My grandfather sailed with Oglethorpe in '33 It's second nature for *us* to singe the don's whiskers—to go on singeing 'em, so long as there's an alien left on our doorstep Canada's another story. The Canadians are brothers."

"Not when they insist on raiding our frontiers," said Toby.

"Who says they've raided on our soil?"

"I do, sir," said Toby "We repelled more than one such band of marauders while I served with Darby's Rangers *After* the treaty was signed, mind you There'll be others until we unite in earnest."

Crowther's cheeks were wine-colored now. "So you're asking me to take orders from someone in Philadelphia? Someone I don't even know?"

"General Darby was willing, sir"

"General Darby was a rich man who could indulge his whims I'm a veteran with fences to mend"

Toby nodded vaguely, hesitating to provoke this fire-eater to the challenge point In a way, he could sympathize with Crowther's bombast—Crowther personified the attitude of too many others in this big, glittering room Like the ex-

colonel, they were decked in their best, magnificent beyond words to country eyes, like Crowther, they were profoundly uneasy Drawn to the richest house in Savannah, like magnetic motes to a lodestar, they did their best to move. Despite their fine satins, Toby suspected that most of them would go home to black-bean suppers; to shuttered homes whence even the house slaves had fled, to burned-over acres where the brush had invaded more than one proud doorsill . . . He came back to what the judge was saying and wished again that he could separate the law from the demagogue. Armstrong was obviously the judge who would hear Nancy's lawyers tomorrow A few discreet questions would hardly smack of collusion

"If you'd stop fulminating a moment, Crowther," said the judge "If you'll consider moving with the times, you might get help with your broken fences—right in this house."

"Only if you rule for Nancy tomorrow, Armstrong. Never for this young revolutionary."

Toby found that he could laugh, after all; the colonel's frankness was rather refreshing. "Surely you won't dismiss me so cavalierly."

"You're back country, my lad," said Crowther. "You believe with that rascal Jefferson that all men are created equal. Right?"

"Right so far, sir. I believe they should make their own luck thereafter"

"And I believe the vast mass of men was born to serve a master I agree with that Northern rascal, Hamilton—the public is a great beast Happy only when it's in harness"

"Will you define our masters, Colonel?"

"You see them before you, Kent. The men who have always ruled"

"Crowther refers to our landowners, Doctor," said the judge drily.

"I was born to the ownership of half an upcountry county," said the colonel "My father before me inherited that land under Oglethorpe's own seal. Naturally I'll fight if a king I never saw tries to tax me into poverty I'll fight you just as gladly, Kent, if you offer me money—and advice."

Toby kept his smile, and his temper. "Would you take one and not the other?"

"Never from an enemy, sir. And you *are* my sworn enemy. Why deny it?"

"I'll deny it until you've proved otherwise. We fought the British together Why must we fight each other now?"

"Because I was only fighting for my land, you, and Sam

Hoyt, and a few misguided owners like Darby, were fighting a revolution"

"Why d'you hate that word? General Darby has often said that this country has been in a state of peaceful revolution since its beginning That we'll go on revolting against old orders, and outworn faiths, until we die" Toby was still smiling, though the smile was a trifle strained now "Perhaps we *will* fight each other, Colonel. Can't we make it a peaceful war?"

"Spoken like a *democrat,* sir," Crowther had expelled the word as though it were a bad oyster. "A democrat like your overseer—who won't rest until every man on this planet is free to go to ruin in his own way"

"Isn't that why most of us escaped to America—our forebears included?"

"Take those sentiments out of Georgia, sir Take them to Virginia and lay them at the feet of Thomas Jefferson, the poor man's god Or that dictator Washington Tell them we'll fight 'em tomorrow if they presume to tell gentlemen how to run their world"

"Calumniate Mr. Washington in my presence, sir, and I'll fight you today"

The new voice was suave, faintly contemptuous, and touched by a hint of foreign accent. They swung to it in unison as the newcomer crossed the Darby parquet Toby had a quick impression of a tall dark man, handsome in a vulpine way. Of flashing black eyes that were doing their best to pin Colonel Crowther to the wall Crowther shrugged, and subsided with a rumble

"So it's you, Pagnol I might have known"

"Will you proceed, Colonel? Or shall we meet in the Trustees' Garden? There's still enough light for pistols"

"Damn you, Pagnol, I can't shoot a former ally."

"Then don't slander a former commander"

"I served under Marion, sir," said the colonel But his truculence was gone, as though it had never been "And it's odd that you, a Frenchman, should champion a man you never even saw."

"Not half so odd as the spectacle of good Americans refusing to unite," said the Frenchman "May I escort you from the storm center, Dr Kent? Or should I say from the *ancien régime* to other air?"

They left the colonel still muttering in his stock Judge Armstrong laid a friendly hand on Toby's sleeve as they passed

"Until tomorrow, Doctor."

"Will you join us, Armstrong?" asked the Frenchman.

"Believe me, I could tell the doctor nothing he does not know "

"We believe you, *monsieur l'avocat.*" The Frenchman offered Toby a thin-lipped smile For the first time, Toby had a chance to note the man's wooden-idol handsomeness The thin, brooding profile would have graced a saint's sarcophagus —or an anteroom of hell—with equal ease Whatever this fellow's sins, thought Toby, he's lived, and suffered. Martha to the contrary, perhaps he can help me now.

"Our Mr Armstrong," said Pagnol, "is a true and upright judge He'll comment on clients only after they make their deposition. This way if you please, Doctor. We've put off our talk too long "

Pagnol looked neither to right nor left as he preceded Toby down the long room. Bowing like a house-bred basilisk to some of the guests, staring through others with icy aplomb, he opened a pair of glass doors that gave to a kind of loggia enclosing a formal garden. As the doors clicked shut behind them the party seemed to recede magically, to be replaced by a green gloom of wistaria and live oak, the metallic whisper of a cabbage palm Pagnol settled on a bench beneath the wide green fronds and waved Toby to a facing seat.

"*Voilà*, Doctor Already the air is cleaner."

"I think you rescued me just in time "

"It was Mrs. Gregory's thought, not mine. She detailed me to watch you—from a discreet distance Naturally, I could not help overhearing your sentiments May I say that they coincide with mine?"

"You may indeed," said Toby "It's good to have an ally." Two can play your game, Captain Pagnol, he added silently.

"Perhaps it's too soon to count me among your allies, Doctor Remember, I'm in Mrs Gregory's camp."

"You brought me here with a purpose, then?"

"Only at her orders She'll join us the moment she can slip away Or, should I say, the moment she can avoid her sister-in-law's sharp eyes?" Pagnol's smile took the sting from his words Pagnol's hands, outlining an invisible menace, subsided gently "Speaking of Mrs. Martha Darby, may I ask what she's said of me so far?"

"If we spoke of you at all, sir——"

Pagnol sighed gently "I know, of course, that gentlemen do not betray a confidence "

"I'm honored by the classification "

"It is a simple fact, Doctor As a student of my fellow man, I recognize the gentleman in you instantly—the will to help others Fools like Crowther see only the country boy, who must be snubbed at all costs—and destroyed, if possible."

"May I ask how Mrs Gregory sees me?"

"She will tell you that in her own words. Let us revert to the absorbing subject of Felix Pagnol. I must prove to you that he is also a gentleman—a man to be trusted"

"Prove away, sir," said Toby. "You have my attention"

"And your open mind as well? You *did* discuss me, rather thoroughly, with *la belle Marthe?*"

"You know a great deal of this household, Captain"

"I have ways of knowing, Doctor. It amuses me to keep my knowledge up to date Not that it required genius to guess that you and the lovely Mrs Darby have already had your *entretien* If there's one thing the lady can't resist, it's gossip. When you combine gossip with intrigue——"

"You will explain that, sir!"

"Believe me, I have only admiration for Martha Darby. She is strong, and I applaud strength in women In fact, Doctor, I'd say she was stronger than either of us Being mere men, our romantic natures are blended with pity Being a woman, she pities no one but herself, and wastes no time on a romance that does not give her the leading part"

"We were discussing you, Captain Pagnol, not Mrs Darby"

"When you know me better, Doctor, you'll find that I must be studied against a background of ladies I have known Not that I claim to be numbered among Mrs. Darby's lovers, or, for that matter, among Mrs Gregory's." Pagnol stopped Toby's sputter with a negligent wave "Both ladies interest me, nonetheless Especially Mrs Roy Darby's boredom—which is natural, in the circumstances"

"I'd hardly say that she was bored. After all, she's got just what she wants"

"And is anything more boring than that? Actually, *la belle Marthe* can go no further in Savannah, and she is intelligent enough to face the fact Unlike her sister-in-law and chief rival, she is accepted for one reason only· the fact that she bears the Darby name Just as you, my dear doctor, are accepted—pro tem, at least—because you control the Darby purse strings" Again long, aristocratic fingers flicked Toby's interruption aside "Shall we say, then, that Mrs Roy Darby is both bored and frustrated? And that she invents little fictions to cheat her unhappiness? Naturally, I'd be a prime subject"

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"A gentleman from foreign parts, with no visible occupation now he's put aside his uniform? A friend of her chief rival? Come, Dr. Kent, don't idealize the opposite sex They enjoy nothing more than clawing us—behind our backs, or vis-à-vis"

"Mrs. Darby knew you in Havana."

"Not nearly so well as she'd have liked."

"Modesty, sir, is not among your virtues."

"Only fools are modest, Doctor, only cowards are reticent. Come, let us talk openly—before Mrs Gregory takes you over How did *la belle Marthe* brand me this time? As a pirate? A Casanova? A spy? Or merely as Mrs. Gregory's suitor?"

"She said you were a prize master during the war."

"I was d'Estaing's staff officer, in charge of stores Naturally I visited many ports *à la derobée,* to make sure that supplies moved through the blockade. Just as naturally I owned shares in several privateers—if only to prove my faith in war as the normal state of man. But if Mrs Darby implies that I engaged in piracy then, she is romancing If she believes that I'm a pirate today—or the agent of pirates—she's more stupid than I think."

Pagnol had spoken without heat Now he spread his hands in a final gesture of dismissal and rose briskly. Toby kept his own seat, impressed, despite himself, by the man's insistence, his level eyes

"Ask her to confront me with these lies," said Pagnol "She would never dare She knows I'd be forced to call out her husband She can't risk losing Dr. Roy Darby—yet."

"May I ask, then, why you're in Savannah, Captain Pagnol?"

"Would you accuse me of hyperbole if I said that I love your country—and your country's dream—as I never loved a woman?"

The timbre of Pagnol's voice had changed; try as he might Toby could not doubt its ring of sincerity "Most of the people in that room behind us are dedicated to its speedy destruction —or, at best, to compromises that will destroy the dream in time Only the best of you have dreamed true· your Mr. Jefferson, your Mr Franklin—to name but two The kind old man who charged you to implement the same dream, here in Georgia——"

"Whose side are you on, Captain Pagnol?" The question had escaped Toby spontaneously. But the Frenchman went on, as though he had not heard

"The best dreams, of course, must tarnish with time Victor Darby's reach—like America's—may exceed his grasp. Who can tell? At least it is worth a trial"

"Have you told Mrs Gregory that?"

"Mrs Gregory is aware of my views—and of my loyalty"

"What if the two conflict?"

"Loyalty, naturally, must take precedence I have urged her to accept the Darby Company, as the last, and best, ex-

pression of her father's heart. If she insists on another course, I cannot question her motives."

"Suppose they prove her a Tory?"

"Mrs Gregory is too wise to embrace that moldy dogma The Tories are doomed here in the New World, just as their counterparts are doomed in Britain and in France. Let the survivors emigrate and live out their hour. There is no place for them on this bustling continent. No, Dr Kent; if Mrs Gregory demolishes you in the Georgia courts, she will do so for a better reason"

"Can you name just one?"

"Now it is I who must be discreet, sir. At least believe I'll be your friend if the fates permit."

Toby could hardly ignore the outstretched hand Pagnol's handshake was as compelling as his manner, a swordsman's grip, matching the surgeon's own.

"Observe that Mrs Gregory is just entering the loggia, Doctor. Perhaps she will throw light where I cannot."

vi

In her hooded pelisse, with its ermine cord knotted just below her chin, Nancy Gregory resembled her non-existent serving maid more than ever—a simple, all-but-virginal figure, too tall to suggest pathos, yet strangely humble Only the clack of high, red-varnished heels betrayed the woman beneath those velvet folds Toby snapped to his feet, conscious that the swiftly descending March twilight had brought with it the chill of the sea Or perhaps the aura of cold was Mrs Gregory's, after all, as she moved gracefully through the arch of the loggia, acknowledging his courtesy with the barest of nods.

Pagnol was at her side instantly. *"Veux-tu que je reste?"*

"Un moment, Felix."

The Frenchman bowed as only a Frenchman can Envying his grace, to say nothing of his strange intimacy, Toby held his ground Waistdeep bows, in his lexicon, went with powdered wigs.

"The fact is, Doctor, I can stay but a moment Perhaps you should retire now, Felix"

"Speak in French if you wish," said Toby "I know the language well enough—thanks to your father He insisted that I study it at Edinburgh."

"D'you consider this meeting indiscreet, Doctor?"

"On the contrary, Mrs Gregory. I appreciate the honor."

He heard Felix Pagnol chuckle softly in the growing dark. The Frenchman's withdrawal was the acme of suavity Strolling on pointed toes, and humming a wordless tune, he crossed

the garden to inspect a flowering shrub in its far corner—like an actor who cannot bear to leave the scene, though he realizes that dramatic license requires he keep out of earshot

"What's your game, Doll?" said Toby, not at all suavely.

"My name is not Doll, Doctor"

"I prefer to use it for the moment Why'd you attempt to make a fool of me?"

"Admit I succeeded wonderfully."

"Why?"

"Need you ask—now?"

"Naturally not I felt it might clear the air if you put your subterfuge into words"

"Think back, Doctor You yourself said I should have boarded the flatboat in person"

"Why did you hide in homespun and a bonnet?"

"And the back-country accent," she said. "Don't deny it deceived you completely"

He found that he was laughing, and cursed himself for unbending "Do you add acting to your accomplishments?"

"I've performed more than once, as an amateur," she said "As Clara Claymore in *The Swain's Revenge* As Ophelia to my fiancé's Hamlet Mr. Thatch praised me highly in the *Mercury*"

"You said you had but a moment, Mrs Gregory Shouldn't we come to the point?"

"The point is simple, Dr. Kent I've come to express my thanks"

"What have you to thank me for?"

"As Clara Claymore would say, you spared me when I was in your power Isn't that enough?"

"The Darby fortune is still in my power," he said. "Which d'you value more—the money or your virtue?"

He had hoped to strike sparks with the question, but Nancy Gregory barely stirred in the gloom "I value both highly, Doctor What lone woman doesn't?"

"I respected your virtue Or should I say that I respected what I considered your—your innocence?"

She inclined her head gravely. "I accept the rebuke, it's richly deserved"

"Why shouldn't I respect your inheritance too? And make it grow?"

"I've studied my father's will thoroughly," she said "I've studied the charter for the company he proposes It's my belief that he was out of his mind when he wrote both documents. Or responding to pressure from without"

"Both beliefs are unfounded, Mrs Gregory. Will you take

your brother's word for that—and mine? Or must we prove ourselves in court?"

"What sane man would plan to found a company on shares with five thousand people involved? People who can't sign their names?"

"Most of us can do that much—and more—thanks to your father's back-country schools. Most of us would work all the harder with such an incentive Granted the profits would be slight at first——"

But there was no stopping Nancy Gregory now "Men must work for other men—that's human nature Most men are unfit to work for themselves——"

"Thanks to their overlords?"

"Their own natures That's why overlords are needed"

"Didn't we fight the Revolution to abolish overlords?"

"Don't be sentimental, Doctor *You* fought Britain because my father gave you orders *I* absented myself until the fighting ended Not because I believed what my—my husband believed I wanted the colonies to be free I wanted Georgians to make their own laws, get rich in their own way"

"All Georgians, Mrs Gregory?"

"All who are worthy or able My forebears worked hard for their riches *I* mean to work just as hard, if I can best you in the courts Yes, and I'll make work for those—those others Father tried to help But I'll never spread his riches among them—so thin that we'll all be starving in a year." Her voice broke on that, he was sure there were tears in her eyes, though her face was a mere white blur in the shadow of her cowl

"You mean to fight, then?"

"I mean it desperately"

"Wouldn't it be simpler to sign the charter, come into the company as a director, and help us to cut losses?"

"My father knew I'd never sign the charter He says as much in the paper itself"

"You could give us a fair trial without committing yourself Even if we failed, you'd see how the money went——" Toby hesitated on that, fearing to play into her hands by stating an honest doubt of his own "Your father saw the possibility of failure clearly enough Even with the worst of luck, my guess is you'd be the richest woman in Georgia if——"

"If you're forced to return the estates to me?"

"Two years would tell the company's story Is that too long to—well, to let me prove I'm honest? That I do have your future at heart, along with the future of the poorest upriver cropper?"

"I'm not flattered by the comparison "

"You feel you're a superior being?"

"I didn't say that. Only that I want what's mine—to use in my own fashion "

"You seemed the same flesh when I took you in my arms," he said "In fact, I liked you better as Dolly Lake "

He saw the velvet pelisse stir, saw an arm dart forth like an angry snake But Nancy Gregory did not strike him, after all Instead, her fist beat a thoughtful tattoo on a chair back, as though she were cooling her anger before she spoke again

"I deserved that, too, of course Would you consider an offer, Doctor, before we face Judge Armstrong?"

"Name it I've a completely open mind "

"Just now you suggested I enter the company as a director As you know, I've been my father's chatelaine from girlhood I profited by his—his advanced ideas to acquire as good an education as any man Better, to be honest, than most of the men I know "

"I'll endorse that, sight unseen "

"As a doctor, then, you'll admit that women do have brains —if they're permitted to use them?"

"As a doctor, and a fellow human—if you'll permit me "

"Even during my marriage I kept the Darby books I worked at my father's side for years—in his offices, in the field If you must know, I went to Darbyville today to oversee the tobacco planting It was I who laid out the first rice paddy at Sangaree At this moment I'm driving every slave on the island to prepare for the seeding "

"Obviously we can't afford to lose you "

"I'd hoped to take up this work again, with full authority, when the war was over I'd hoped my father would—well, recognize my contribution at last "

"Doesn't the charter prove that he did just that?"

"I mentioned an offer just now. If I agree to withdraw my suit to break the will—if I promise to do all in my power to advance your medical practice in Savannah—will you resign from the Darby Company in my favor?"

The question fell into a vast silence as Toby stared at her, uncomprehending Nancy Gregory broke it at last with a small rueful chuckle "Have I overestimated you, Doctor? Do you feel that a mere woman is incompetent to preside over her father's estates?"

"I'm thinking of his wishes And of our agreement "

"I still say that my offer is generous In two years you'll be a failure—and I'll recover the estates for my own use Why not let me take over now? Go back to the work you were born to do?"

"Have you discussed this with Roy?"

"There's no need Roy has just one wish—to go into practice with you in Savannah As I say, I'd provide for that, amply. I'll even build you a hospital and endow a free clinic, as my father wished. You see, Dr Kent, I'm not inhuman—merely practical. It's a woman's only real virtue when she's alone"

"What of your projected marriage into the Bristol clan?" To save him, Toby could not resist plumbing this incredible scheme to its depths, even as every instinct urged him to veto it without a hearing.

"Harvey Bristol has confidence in my judgment Would I be marrying him otherwise?"

Harvey Bristol is penniless, thought Toby From what I've heard of that young fire-eater, he'd back any scheme that brought hard money to his purse Aloud, he said only, "You choose your husbands wisely, Mrs Gregory. What of Captain Pagnol?"

"Captain Pagnol is a friend of long standing," said Nancy, with perfect composure "Naturally he has the rights of a critic too But he observes my world from the outside, as a foreign visitor—a civilized visitor, with no money worries, and no stake in Georgia's future—or in mine."

Remembering Martha's warnings, Toby looked at Nancy sharply, wondering if she had chosen this shadowed nook deliberately to conceal her blushes At the moment he felt that it would take a great deal to make Nancy Gregory blush properly. Standing eye to eye with her, furious that her height made it impossible for him to tower over her, he suppressed an insane desire to tear that dark hood aside, to cover her pale, intent face with kisses . . Desire, that unpredictable beast, retired growling to its cave, and Dr. Tobias Kent drew a deep breath, knowing he was sane again He had wanted Dolly Lake there on the flatboat in the rainy afternoon, he would want Nancy Gregory again, beyond all enduring But it was no more than desire, he repeated solemnly The will to destroy, never the will to love At this moment he could think of no human being he detested more

"Have you quite finished?"

"Quite, Doctor I'm waiting for your answer."

"My answer is simple I don't take bribes"

"Call it a compromise Compromise has a nicer sound"

"I gave your father my word to fight this thing through How could I resign control, even if I trusted your motives?"

"So I must go to the courts?"

"Our next meeting will be in Judge Armstrong's chambers

May I add that I'd order you from this house tonight if one thing didn't save you?"

"Spare me that boorish finale. I'm on my way to Tondee's Tavern."

"I mentioned a saving detail, Mrs. Gregory. Would you care to hear it?"

She had turned into the loggia arch as she spoke. Now she swung back to face him, and once again her white arm stole forth from the folds of her pelisse, like a snake about to strike

"And what is my saving grace, pray?"

"That girl upstairs," he said "The fact that you sheltered her in her trouble That proves you've a heart, if one has the wit to find it I won't add the fact that you wanted me on that barge—as much as I wanted you"

Her hand swung in earnest then, but he had anticipated the onslaught, and caught her wrist in mid-passage, twisting it expertly Nancy spun on her heel; he heard the snap of leather as the slipper caught in a crack of the loggia and gave way under the fury of her stamping foot. Then she was pressed hard against the curve of the brick archway, with both his arms about her, and his heart sang its own triumph as he felt her go limp at last there in the chill darkness

What might have followed he never knew. At first he thought that the muted scream had issued from Nancy's own throat Then, as the clamor of his pulses stilled, he knew that it had come from within the house—a long-drawn wail of pain, repeated and held in a keening note A cry for help that steadied him as efficiently as cold water dashed into his eyes His arms dropped to his sides, releasing Nancy instantly. With that gesture he realized that she had guessed the source of that scream as accurately as he

"It's Mary, Doctor, she'll need me"

"She'll need us both," he said, and followed her into the hallway, matching her headlong rush stride for stride.

Roy was on the stair as they entered, above the stir of departing guests, ignoring the inquiry in a score of anxiously raised faces. His own hesitation vanished instantly as Toby joined him on the landing

"I was just coming down to find you."

Nancy had preceded them upstairs without a backward glance From the corner of his eye Toby caught the abrupt appearance of Felix Pagnol in the loggia door, and wondered how much of the battle royal he had overhead Then he followed the others into the upper hall and into the sickroom—and lost himself instantly in the demands of his profession

Martha already stood at the head of the four-poster—a

strangely vibrant Martha, though the hand on Mary Bristol's shoulder was soothing enough The girl under the sheet lay with jackknifed knees, her eyes big with fright and agony. Another pent-up scream escaped her taut lips as Toby sat down at the bedside.

"This is Dr Kent, Mary" Martha's voice was as soothing as her hands, but her eyes, as they met Toby's, were hard with anger. "He's come to help you"

Mary Bristol murmured indistinctly—it was evident that Roy's opiate had not quite worn away.

"Where does it hurt, Mary?"

But he could guess the focal point of danger even before his fingers began to test the muscular tone of the abdomen Despite the girl's anguished breathing respiration involved only the chest itself, experience had told him long ago that this usually signaled trouble in the cavity beneath He found what he sought at once, an acute tightening in the triangle above the right pelvic bone

"Try hard, Mary, you'll find you can speak When did this start?"

"Only a half-hour ago I knew there was a—a gathering downstairs I didn't want——"

"Will you order more candles, Martha?" He looked up sharply, conscious for the first time of Nancy's intent presence there at the foot of the bed "How can the doctor examine Mary in the dark?"

"Extra candle sconces are on the way," said Martha. "If you'll excuse me, I'll hurry them along"

Her withdrawal had the same odd tension, explained, adequately enough, in the words she flung from the door "You might have told me sooner, you know If I'd realized what the trouble was——" She was gone on that, leaving the unspoken threat in the air

Despite himself, Toby smiled faintly It was quite like Martha to guess instantly that this was an unwanted pregnancy The outraged-matron air was even more in character

"Bring the night light closer, Roy. I think we can be sure of this in a moment"

There was no doubt in his mind as he finished his internal probing, but he hesitated to speak his diagnosis aloud.

"Shall we discuss this outside?"

"Don't keep her in suspense," said Nancy "She has a right to know"

He looked down at Mary Bristol as the girl's hand closed on his wrist. Something in her eyes—a steadfast courage that went strangely with the childlike face—convinced him that

Nancy was right Doubly right, since there was no time to be lost now

"It's a Fallopian pregnancy," he said as steadily as he could. "Will you agree with that diagnosis, Roy?"

Roy Darby spoke just as evenly. "It was my fear from the first "

Toby spoke rapidly against the girl's incomprehension, keeping the picture as general as he could At Edinburgh he had dissected many specimens, showing the mass of the almost incredibly tiny fetus that had burst into being in the tube that led from ovary to uterus With Roy beside him at the dissecting table, his questing knife had demonstrated the aftermath of such growth While it was possible, if not probable, that conception took place in the Fallopian tube, fetal growth in that passage was invariably fatal Blocked somehow in its descent to its normal home, the incredibly tiny child-to-be produced an instant distention Invariably the small tube, no longer able to adjust itself to the increasing size of the fetus, ruptured into the abdominal cavity, the entering wedge for death itself

Surgery, and surgery alone, could save Mary Bristol now He made that statement flatly as he ended his little lecture and avoided both women's eyes

"The knife would kill me just as surely "

He forced himself to look at Mary then, marveling at the girl's calm acceptance of her chances She had hardly overstated the case from the layman's viewpoint In this part of America surgery of any but the most elementary kind was almost unknown, any invasion of the abdominal cavity was daring beyond most doctors' ken

"The knife would heal you—and spare you " He was glad to see the color flood her cheek as she grasped that meaning instantly "Naturally the reason for operating would never go beyond that door "

"My father should know, of course "

"True enough Shall I send for Dr Bristol?"

Nancy spoke crisply "No need of that, Dr Kent A dozen emissaries of doom are crossing Savannah now, to warn our dean of medicine " Even in his absorption with the present problem Toby could wonder at her bitterness

"What time would the operation require?"

He saw that Mary Bristol was struggling with her doubts, and forced assurance into his tone "An hour, perhaps I'll grant you the danger, but the technique is in no way complex. I need only deliver the tube, excise the fetus, and close the wound Your chance of recovery is excellent " He watched

Roy covertly as he spoke, hoping that his younger colleague would come to his rescue

"There's no finer surgeon on this side of the Atlantic," said Roy. "I commend you to his hands, Mary, with every hope "

"You've done this—this operation before, Doctor?"

"Once, in the clinic at Edinburgh The patient lived to thank me "

"It's done often, then?"

"Only one other case is on record abroad. Not many patients are as brave as you "

"What would *you* advise, Nancy?"

Nancy did not stir for a moment Toby, still at the bedside, waited with bowed head for the blow to fall But when Nancy spoke, her voice was quite as firm as Roy's

"Dr. Kent is right, Mary. You *are* a brave girl."

"You think I should——?"

"I think you'd rather live than die, no matter what the risk. As Roy says, you couldn't find a better surgeon My father saw to that "

Toby accepted the compliment gravely as he got up Even with its price tag, it was minted gold at the moment.

"Well, Mary?"

"You may operate when ready, Doctor."

"I'm ready now."

As ready as I'll ever be, he added silently, and his eyes sought Nancy Gregory's across the wide counterpane, accepting this final challenge without words

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A half-hour later, scrubbing his hands in the pantry door, Toby reviewed his preparations for the last time Friends, and he thanked Heaven for their providential arrival just as the last guests were departing, were strategically placed at downstairs windows Mary Bristol was sleeping deeply now in the upstairs bedroom, thanks to a final opiate Strapped to the operating table, with Roy at his side to pinion her, there was little chance that her writhings would spoil the gamble he was taking On the landing a brazier cast goblin shadows down the stairwell as a great brass kettle simmered beside the mound of lint a house slave had scraped at his orders. Dido, who was Jubal's wife as well as his presiding genius in the pantry, hovered above the flame The moment needed a charm to give it substance, he told himself grimly. Already he could curse the risk he was taking, even as he admitted that the risk was inevitable

Worst of all, if he ruled out Mary Bristol's belief in his

omnipotence, was Nancy's insistence on remaining for the actual operation He closed his eyes against that white-coifed, white-aproned image as she appeared beside Dido on the landing, looked down at him for a moment, and vanished Martha, like a sensible woman, had yielded to her fears long since and retired to her own bedroom with one of Roy's aromatics to soothe her into a coma. Why could not Nancy Gregory do likewise?

But there was little time to wonder why Nancy, who had every reason to quail in such a crisis, should stand firm—while Martha, who had grown up with death in the wilderness, should go soft as any sheltered tidewater aristocrat He looked up with something like relief as carriage wheels squeaked in the sand outside, and squared his shoulders against the menace of the booted feet on the portico. Again he thanked Heaven for those watching eyes downstairs, for the knowledge he need not face this inevitable invasion alone

The door burst open without ceremony before Jubal could scurry forth in answer to the brazen clamor of the knocker. Taking three long strides into the foyer, Toby found himself face to face with the intruders—a huge, squarish man in an old-fashioned box coat and untidy wig and his younger counterpart, a bristling, too-handsome dandy whose bandbox manner was hardly spoiled by the aura of brandy that surrounded him

"Dr Bristol, I presume?"

The older man barely nodded, without so much as a glance at Toby The younger, staggering a little in an absurd burlesque of dignity, strode forward boldly and stared at Toby with his arms akimbo—a bully about to join battle.

"*Dr Kent,* I presume?"

"Your servant, sir."

"Damn your manners, fellow. You know who we are Don't waste our time Where's my sister?"

"Hold your tongue, Harvey," said the elder Bristol heavily "Kent can see you're drunk as well as I"

"Who wouldn't drink, sir, when my wife-to-be ignores me to go prancing after this interloper——"

Toby heard a scurry of feet on the landing, and guessed that Dido had fled to the regions above A white shadow had replaced her there Nancy, it seemed, had come down in time to hear

"Tell me this much, Kent, before we take Mary home—when do I have the pleasure of shooting *you?*"

But Dr Bristol had already thundered for silence. "No one is shooting anyone at present Not while Mary needs us Will you take me to her, Kent?"

"Gladly, sir. You're just in time"

"No one's taking her home. You least of all, Matthew Bristol"

Nancy's voice had cut through their words like clean steel Nancy herself, a tall archangel in the gloom of the stairwell, drew back reluctantly to let them pass But Matthew Bristol had already paused on the bottom stair, as though he could not believe his ears

"I've tried not to judge you harshly, my dear."

"Mary's of full age, and she's put her affairs in my hands. She's remaining here"

"I'm still her father, Nancy. She's shamed me, but she needs me now"

"She needs a doctor, Matthew She has one"

"She's my daughter, and I'll judge her needs"

Toby took a step forward Diplomacy seemed ruled out in advance, but he felt he must make the effort "You have every right to examine her, sir. I feel your diagnosis will agree with mine"

"Nancy! If you've permitted this bumpkin to lay a hand on Mary——" Old Bristol swallowed the rest, as though he could not believe his ears Moved by a different kind of incredulity, Toby fought to choke his anger. But his voice, when he spoke again, was not quite his own

"If you'll control your temper, sir, and remember we're both physicians——"

"You mentioned a diagnosis, I believe Let's have it."

"Upstairs, if you please"

"Here, sir! And damn you for an upstart!" It was Harvey, lunging into the scene with a violence that threatened the stair rail Toby kept his eyes on the old doctor.

"You endorse that command?"

"My son's right Speak your piece, then stand aside"

"Your daughter has a tubal pregnancy It'd be fatal to move her"

For an instant Toby was certain that the elder Bristol would succumb to apoplexy there on the landing—so certain, in fact, that he put out a hand to steady him Harvey Bristol slapped the hand aside

"You may say that again, bumpkin"

"I'm a doctor, Bristol Your sister is pregnant, with a dangerous complication Only an immediate operation will save——"

He swiveled just in time as Harvey Bristol's fist, smashing upward to his jaw, missed by a fraction, and splintered a wall panel Harvey's free hand swung wildly, just as Toby's foot thrust forward, tangling his assailant's shanks and send-

ing him into a grotesque somersault No one spoke as the oversized dandy crashed headlong down the stairwell, sprawled in the foyer, and lay still.

"Will you check my diagnosis now, Dr. Bristol?"

The older doctor followed him into the upper hall without a word Nancy remained motionless on the landing. Toby, measuring the now inert menace of Harvey Bristol from the last stair, shrugged off the threat in advance and bowed old Bristol into the sickroom

"Why is she on that table?"

"I've said we must operate, sir. She's put herself in my hands"

Even by candlelight Bristol's claret-red cheeks seemed purple now. But he did not speak as he bent above the impromptu operating table and the slight form pinioned beneath the sheets. Toby stood back and held his own tongue as Bristol's fingers moved clumsily over the distended area Accustomed as he was to the rough methods of some practitioners, he was appalled by the crudeness of this examination

"An internal examination should convince you that——"

"It's a simple inflation of the bowel. Why put her under opiates?"

"I tell you it's a tubal swelling"

The massive shoulders dismissed the interruption. "My carriage is outside, Kent I've brought men from my estates. I'm taking her home Make no mistake on that."

"We've anticipated as much. Gabriel Thatch and our overseer have just arrived from Darbyville. They're stationed in the lower portico, with a brace of pistols apiece. Captain Pagnol is at the library window, with a half-dozen primed muskets. You were permitted in this house only because you're Mary's father. If another man sets foot on the portico, he'll stop a bullet"

Toby had let the words burst out unchecked; he could not regret them now Clearly only a show of force and a stubbornness that matched his own would convince Matthew Bristol

"Damn you, sir. Double damn your threats. It's a simple inflammation. Bleeding and a few fomentations will cure it overnight"

"And if she dies of that inflammation, will you record it as such?"

"I stand by my judgments, Kent. Will you give up what's mine or must I return in force?"

There was no mistaking the threat· Bristol meant every word If he yielded now—if he permitted Mary to be removed, and Mary died—her father would cover his blunder, even in death Inflammation would be certified as the cause, with no

chance of post-mortem Toby knew that post-mortems were almost never performed in America, certainly there would be no chance of one in Mary's case, with old Bristol in possession of the body Spread by deliberate intention, word would go through Savannah that an upstart back-country doctor—the same upstart who had dared to assume direction of the Darby estates—had failed in his first diagnosis It would be more than enough to discredit his partnership with Roy, it might even bar him from practice in Georgia Certainly it would be prime ammunition for Harvey Bristol, the lawyer he had just sent sprawling, and for Nancy Gregory, that same lawyer's fiancée

And then, with a great surge of relief, a still greater wonder, he remembered how stanchly Nancy had backed his decision to operate Perhaps she was only testing him—and praying he would fail. He could not pause over such questions now, the fact that she supported him, as a doctor, was enough

"Patient ready, Dr Kent"

It was Roy who spoke as he came briskly through the door with Toby's well-worn surgical case. Beginning to lay out instruments on the side table, he did not even glance at the older doctor, the coolness in his voice went beyond contempt, ignoring the visitor as though he had not been

"You'd better go, Dr Bristol"

"I shall return, sir If you touch her with the knife, I'll have you tarred and feathered"

"Come back in half an hour You may thank me for saving your daughter's life"

"My son means to kill you, Kent I see no reason for restraining him now"

Nancy spoke crisply from the doorway. "Your son has just been tossed into the street, Matthew, at my order I hardly think he'll be equal to fighting tomorrow—or even the day after"

"Are you forgetting that Harvey is your fiancé?"

"Harvey *was* my fiancé, Matthew I've only this moment jilted him In case he's too drunk to remember, will you tell him that my decision is final?"

"May I ask why?"

"You'll receive a letter in the morning stating my reasons"

Standing a little aside, Toby watched old Bristol's face muscles tighten as breeding fought with rage Robbed of a daughter and the Darby dowry in a single evening, a diehard of his stamp could hardly take the loss calmly And yet the old doctor's voice was strangely calm when he spoke at last

"Your future is your own, Nancy This fellow's recklessness

is something else again For the last time, Kent, will you heed my warning?"

But Nancy spoke ahead of Toby "Will you leave this house, Matthew, or must I give orders to my servants?"

Matthew Bristol raised his massive shoulders and strode from the room. Nancy looked hard at Toby for an instant, shrugged off his unspoken question, and went to the door.

"I'll make sure he's really gone."

The crash of a closing door shook the bedroom walls almost before she could gain the landing Roy, still arranging instruments at the side table, looked up with the same smile that had steadied Toby's hand on a dozen hard-fought fields

"If I know the Bristols, old Matthew will be back with a lynching party by daybreak"

"Damn old Matthew! Why did Nancy jilt his son?"

"I've given up questioning my sister's motives long ago," said Roy "Isn't it enough that she's on our side, pro tem?"

"More than enough Shout for Billy, will you? We must get this over—fast."

viii

Hardly more than a quarter-hour had been needed to complete their preparations Now, with Billy at his familiar place —the two hands spread, like massive black roots, to twine and hold the patient's flesh against the first bite of the steel—with Roy tensely waiting across the table with the first linen compress balanced on a palm, Toby faced his familiar reluctance to begin

He glanced one last time at Nancy Gregory, a patient archangel still, in the chiaroscuro beyond the massed candle sconces, accepting the assurance of her nod He listened one more time to the silence clamped down on the hall—broken only by the scared breathing of the house slaves, clustered, like fearful dark phantoms, on every stair and landing Finally he looked down at the scalpel in his hand and knew it would take all his will to force its first red union with Mary Bristol's flesh

Even as the block tightened in his brain, the scalpel moved, as though the clenched fingers that balanced it were activated by a brain of their own Touching the skin just to the right of the navel, the steel moved downward in a gleaming arc He saw the muscles bunch against the agony as she arched her back against the scalpel's remorseless bite

Deep in the darkened hall he heard that scream echoed in a dozen throats, as the house slaves, taking up that agony in a dark refrain of their own, swayed and moaned in the grip of a fear older than man's first memory. He raised his eyes

just once to meet Nancy Gregory's level gaze, and read nothing there, not even pity. Then Nancy receded into dimness with the others He was no longer Toby Kent, subject to the laws and passions of his kind. From this point until the operation ended he was a controlled machine

Six inches of flesh had already parted under the blade, to expose the glistening white fascia beneath. "The sheath of the rectus abdominis," said Roy, cool as a professor of anatomy, his fingers holding the compress expertly against the spurt of severed vessels "Will you cut the muscles?"

"The rectus runs lengthwise We'll separate, instead."

The scalpel, rolling between his fingers as the compress lifted, nicked the wound a second time, to break the outer sheath of the muscles Contractile tissue bulged through the break, like the pulp of a bursting fruit. Using the scalpel handle now, Toby began to part the muscle fibers, working as rapidly as he dared A vein appeared deep in the wound, thin-walled, bluish, turgid with blood His fingers eased it from the operative field, turning the blade once again for the next, more dangerous, stroke

"The deep epigastric," said Roy. Already he held a pair of rake-like retractors above the wound, waiting for Toby's nod to grip and separate the parallel fibers

"Fortunately it was just where it should be We'll cut from here on"

Another stroke, and the retractors could begin their work. He risked yet another, knowing that the peritoneum was just beneath the steel now, that an awkward pressure of the blade could nick through to vital organs beneath, ruining the operation before it was fairly begun. A compress came into his hand, and he sponged away the last of the blood, feeling a quiet surge of satisfaction as he saw the first hurdle cleared He had gauged his pressure to a hair's breadth There, in the depths of the six-inch incision, winking like a sliver of cloudy moonlight, was the white wall of the peritoneum—the taut membrane that enclosed the abdominal cavity—now the only barrier to the operative area.

"White as it'll ever be," said Roy "That means no hemorrhage to speak of, so far"

Toby nodded gravely as the steel—moving automatically, now that depth was established—enlarged the wound. If no considerable hemorrhage had developed in the Fallopian area, Mary Bristol's chances of recovery were vastly improved. But the surgeon's knowledge was still woefully incomplete in these blocked cycles of gestation It was quite possible that the fetus—and he could not doubt its existence—might have moved downward to its normal resting place even now, as they worked

to isolate it He put that thought aside as he flicked the scalpel into the open again

A forcep, operated with all possible delicacy, missed the whitish membrane on its first nip, for the hundredth time he wished for the more delicate instruments he had admired in the surgical museum at Edinburgh, though this rough steel pincer had served him well enough at war. The second try clipped the peritoneum firmly, tented it into the wound, held it steady as the scalpel nicked its initial point of entry The membrane opened like a buttonhole, and he held his breath as he waited for the hemorrhage that did not come.

"Shift retractors, please "

The steel enlarged the opening, enough to permit a two-fingered entry, a grooved barrier down which he could cut with ease Roy paralleled the move by thrusting the curved ends of both retractors over the edges of the wound, separating them in tempo with the knife Four fingers were in the abdominal cavity now, then the whole hand Working by touch, aware that he must identify his point of attack by one sense only, Toby permitted himself the most cautious of smiles There was no mistaking the firm, pear-shaped organ he had just palped between thumb and forefinger.

"Uterus normal "

Roy took a deep breath "You have it already?"

"Between my fingers Now I am approaching the tube itself."

Pencil-thin, and placed as normally as a detail in a textbook diagram, the Fallopian tube snaked beneath his fingers as his exploration moved upward, in the direction of the right ovary. In that instant he saw Matthew Bristol leering triumphantly in the background, could all but breathe the acrid reek of the tar pot And then his fingers found what they were seeking at the precise point he had defined in his first examination A small, round swelling in pencil-thin tissue, a slight but definite weakening in the texture of the tube that contained it The picture was complete, but he did not dare put it into words "Any sign of rupture?"

"A slight ooze, no more But I'm sure the tube would have hemorrhaged soon Perhaps by morning."

"Can we deliver it?"

"We can try "

"Steady, Billy It'll soon be over now "

He caught the freedman's grin as he began to work the loop of the tube into the open wound It was a signal they had devised years ago, when an operation was near its climax Not that Billy needed such encouragement Toby had seen him anchor a man twice his size in the vise of those ten spread fingers, letting him thrash at will above and below the opera-

tive area while the wound itself remained immovable as a cleft in stone

Still nested in his fingers, the swollen area of the tube came free at last Delivered into the open wound, it proved his diagnosis beyond all cavil, though the distension of the wall was no larger than a smallish egg As Toby had surmised, the tissue was already on the point of rupture. Even as they watched, a tiny clot began to form around the focal point of the weakness, a sure sign that the pulsing blood beneath was clamoring for egress, as the distension proved more than tissue could bear

"Ligature, please We *are* almost finished now."

"You've been only twenty minutes, so far"

He nodded his thanks, vaguely aware that it had been Nancy's voice that timed them It had seemed an hour, at least, since a force beyond his control had whipped the scalpel into its first stroke

Roy had already passed a curved steel needle into his fingers, with the strand of whipcord flowing from its eye He lifted the tube, and—as Roy steadied it between his own fingers—thrust the curved steel beneath its barrel, careful to go well beneath the artery and vein that coursed there

"Cut and tie, please"

One ligature would tie off the tube between this tiny pregnancy and the uterus, another would encompass the broad ligament beneath, allowing him to section the swelling completely. He waited approvingly as Roy completed the tie, the younger doctor's fingers moved with a slow surety of their own, pressing gently lest the whipcord sever distended tissue The scalpel followed, cutting along the top of the ligament beneath the tube, severing it neatly from that dangerous anchorage A second ligature controlled the slight bleeding, the scalpel moved again, severing the tissue outside the first tie, and the entire structure, delivered completely with those final strokes, came into his hand He drew a deep, hard breath as he laid it in a basin on the side table Now that it was free of the body it had threatened, it seemed incredible that so small an object could wreak such deadly havoc

"Retractors out. We can suture now"

"I'll close the wound," said Roy "You'd best come back to Savannah, Toby Even if that was a masterpiece of its kind——"

He was aware of externals then—of Mary's exhausted moaning, of the bruises that marred her naked thighs and arms, where flesh had ground in agony against the confining straps, of the blood that flecked the sheets outlining their operative field From here his eyes moved up to the steady candle

sheen and Nancy's anxious face beyond Reading the fear in her eyes, he felt his own fears leap into being as his brain, responding completely now, identified certain sounds that clamored for attention beyond this quiet room A confused animal rumble, far louder than the squeals of the house slaves outside the door—a growing thunder of voices that seemed to threaten the house from all sides. The tinkle of breaking glass, as a window crashed inward on the floor below. The bark of a pistol in instant rebuke, shocking the rumble into silence.

Roy, suturing busily at the table, spoke into that ominous void of silence "Matthew Bristol moved faster than I thought "

"So he's carrying out his threat?"

The silhouette of Captain Felix Pagnol, framed in the door, gave Toby his answer even before the Frenchman could speak. Apparently he had waited for some moments to be noticed. Even now Toby could admire the man's poise as he took a step into the room

"I'm afraid the house is surrounded, Doctor "

"How could they so soon?"

"Word of our patient's plight has spread rapidly through Savannah At first it was mainly a crowd of curious neighbors plus a few rascals from below the bluff Then Bristol returns with his own men, and begins to bellow his accusation—how does one say—*à tue-tête?*" The Frenchman shrugged off details "Now, as you see, they clamor for a victim Need I remind you that Georgians enjoy nothing more than tarring a stranger?"

Another crash of glass counterpointed his words neatly Pagnol bowed in the doorframe and whisked from view "Bullets will hold them off for a while, but not forever." This time two pistols barked, almost in unison, as the Frenchman's heels clattered down the stairwell

"Sutures completed, Doctor," said Roy

Forcing himself to ignore the hubbub, Toby returned to the table as Billy, at a nod from Roy, loosened the straps that still bound their patient Mary Bristol, her head lolling, seemed to smile up at him from the dim fog of morphia that still spread its mercies from brain to finger ends. Her pulse, Toby noted, was weak, but its beat was steady Roy had closed the wound as neatly as any housewife Thanks to their dispatch and the unlooked-for absence of hemorrhage, she had every chance to recover—barring the inflammation which so often dogged this type of surgery

"May I help?"

He bowed slightly as Nancy came up to the table with her soft-voiced offer Together, with Billy to steady the rolling

head, they eased Mary smoothly from table to bed Roy covered her instantly with a stack of heated blankets

Roy said, easily enough, "I'll go down and talk to those hotheads, Toby Something tells me I'll know 'em all, down to the last drunken dock hand"

"Won't they disperse in time?"

"Not without a tongue-lashing at least. We're hated here for many reasons Principally, I'm afraid, because we've most of the hard money in Savannah Those fools think we sleep with that gold under our mattresses. Naturally they'd like nothing better tonight than a little virtuous housebreaking"

"Where's the watch, at a time like this?"

"Where the watch usually is—leaning on their cudgels in the nearest alley, and praying we'll do their work"

"We'd best go downstairs, then—both of us."

But Nancy had already blocked the doorframe. "Roy's right It's his task—not yours"

"It's I they're howling for"

"And it was I who backed you, when you insisted on operating"

Toby looked at her curiously, conscious, for the first time of a new note in her voice "As of now I head the Darby Company The Darby stronghold is threatened, I must put down the malcontents"

"And stop a bullet in the attempt?"

"Admit that will settle our quarrel nicely," he said, and turned to the side table that still held his surgical case and the basin containing the section of tube he had just excised Wrapping the latter in a towel, he swung back to the doorway, forcing Nancy to give ground "Unfortunately I don't think I'll stop a bullet tonight Not if I can make old Bristol listen."

He was gone before she could speak again. Even on the stair he could sense the pressure of the crowd just outside the portico—a threat as tangible as the white blur of faces boxing the front garden of the mansion, glimpsed in nightmare perspective through the fanlight of the doorway. He dropped down the stairs two steps at a time, and pulled up short as Martha faced him on the landing

"I won't let you go out there, Toby."

He placed his burden on the newel post and faced Martha squarely If she was afraid, there was no fear in her face—only a too-familiar yearning In that flash he realized that her withdrawal earlier that evening had been strategic With Nancy in command, Martha Darby would have played a poor second fiddle Now, as the mistress of her own home, she could take back authority in a bound

"I'm afraid there's no choice, Martha"

"Sam has sent a slave to Sangaree There'll be twenty men here in another half-hour"

"What if they fire the house in the meantime?"

"They wouldn't dare Besides, the pistols will hold them off" Abruptly her arms were around him, pinning him to the stair rail, her mouth, with all its remembered witchery, clung to his, pleading between her kisses

"I need you too much to lose you, Toby I'll help you, as *she* never could"

"Roy's upstairs, Martha! D'you want him to hear you?"

"I don't mind who hears me," she cried wildly "I've got to make you understand It was you and I from the start—only you and I—— We'll be two of a kind till the end. Believe this much, Toby Kent Let these nabobs bury their own dead."

"You sang another song this afternoon, Martha"

"I wasn't honest this afternoon"

"Are you—ever?"

He freed himself with an effort—so violently that Martha all but sprawled on the stair, the panels of her gown billowing about her like a rosy cloud Even in that taut moment he was conscious of her lure, and the balked rage in her eyes.

"Can't you see, Toby? She only means to use you!"

He snatched his burden from the newel post and ran into the foyer as though he had not heard Here he pulled up sharply, fearing, even now, that Martha would follow him. When he heard her fumble her way upstairs, he turned into the shadowed living room, lighted here and there by the sputter of a torch beyond the garden A candle sprang into flame under his tinder gun Shielding the flame from outside eyes, he whisked the cover from the basin

The excised section, waxen pale in the candlelight, seemed oddly lifeless now—more like a museum exhibit than a threat to life His hands, moving once again by rote, opened the spare scalpel he always carried in his vest pocket The blade moved downward swiftly, bisecting the tube lengthwise and exposing the cause of the egg-shaped swelling Toby stared at it thoughtfully, feeling his features relax in a smile

Matthew Bristol had summoned this mob as an avenging father It was fitting that he should dismiss it as a physican He covered the basin once again and carried it to the foyer

Gabriel, one boot glued to the doorpost, his body flattened into the curve of the wall, motioned him back without turning Toby looked across his friend's shoulder, through the broken pane that served Gabriel as a gun rest Silhouetted in the torchlight, the crowd outside had moved closer, though it had not dared invade the grounds as yet Evidently it had respect for the gun barrels leveled at its collective heart

"Is Bristol out there?"

"Father and son," said Gabriel. "Bellowing for action by the clock. Half that mob are Bristol helots The rest, as usual, are just curious." A torch sputtered through the air as he spoke, landing on the garden walk a scant yard from the portico steps. "They're beginning to improve their aim. Thank God for this afternoon's rain."

"If one lands inside the portico," said Toby, "it'll spark a rush. Wouldn't it be simpler if I just went out?"

"Not before I put a shot through Harvey. He knows my aim That's why he's skulking behind the others"

"Ask old Bristol to step forward. Say I want to talk to him"

"D'you think he'd listen now?"

"Tell him his daughter will recover. Say I'll explain why."

Gabriel inched forward cautiously, until his nose was just inside the broken pane "Can you hear me, Sam?"

The overseer's voice boomed from the next window, though Toby could barely discern his bulky frame in the dark "Try it, Gabe He may listen"

"What d'you think, Pagnol?"

The Frenchman's voice was more distant· Toby judged that he spoke from the nearer of the two tall library windows "Only if you insist. I had hoped to kill the ox myself; he is in my gun sight now"

"How can you be sure?"

"A torch is behind him Besides, I would know that *tête de bœuf* even in the dark." Pagnol chuckled, with utter composure. "Tell him as much, Dr. Kent. Order him to step forward, or drop——"

Silence clamped on the crowd as Toby shouted that command He waited breathless, expecting anything from a concerted rush to a burst of gunfire When Bristol's voice rumbled from the fire-patterned gloom, he could hardly believe his ears

"Are you coming out, Kent?"

"Only if you'll step forward first"

To his amazement, the old doctor separated himself calmly from the mob and strode into the garden walk Toby knocked Gabriel's restraining hand aside and walked to the portico to meet him.

"You're in three gun sights now, Dr. Bristol."

"They know better than to fire. Will you come with us quietly?"

"If you like—yes."

The crowd rumbled deep in its throat, an animal scenting blood. Toby's respect for the old doctor rose mightily as

Bristol lifted a contemptuous hand, waving his men back to the demarcation of the garden wall.

"Must I come up there and collar you?"

"We'll talk first. *Then* I'll come—if you still want me."

"I've said all I have to say!"

"But you haven't listened. Won't you believe your daughter has a chance to recover?"

"You operated. I warned you of the consequences."

"I told you my reason for operating." Toby dropped his voice. "Will you see the proof?"

Something in his voice cut through Bristol's shell. Again Toby held his breath as the older doctor took a long stride down the path, and then another.

"It's a trick, Father! Make him come to you."

Harvey Bristol's voice was grainy with alcohol as he staggered into view at last. No one stirred in the crowd as Gabriel's pistol barked its warning. The younger Bristol spun on his heel, clutching at the spot where his hat had been.

"The next ball," said Gabriel casually, "will be just two inches lower. Will you back up now or take it up your snout?"

Harvey Bristol stood his ground for an instant, one hand, half-raised in a signal to the crowd, went to his forehead instead. His wig had been blown away with his hat, his bullet head, shaved close as any convict's, gave him an oddly childlike look, despite his bulk. Someone guffawed far back in the crowd, with that sound Toby felt the threat change color. A dozen hands had already pulled Harvey Bristol back to the neutral sanctuary of the square. He spoke quickly as the murmur died.

"Haven't we cursed each other enough tonight, Bristol? You're a doctor—and I believe you're honest. Will you come to this portico and behave like one?"

Old Bristol shook his head tiredly, like a mastiff at bay, then stumped up to the portico.

"Produce your proof—if you have proof."

Toby pivoted away from the garden, shielding the basin from a dozen pairs of eyes. Only Mary Bristol's father could see what the lifted towel revealed.

Even by torchlight there was no mistaking the identity of the homunculus in the basin—the head overlarge, though hardly the size of one's little finger, the limbs so tiny they could scarcely be said to exist. It was an early pregnancy, perhaps the earliest Toby had seen. But it was unmistakable as it lay there in the shell of the tube where it had come into being and all but cost its mother's life.

Toby spoke crisply, in the barest of whispers. "As you see, your daughter *was* pregnant. Only surgery could have

saved her Granted it was risky, won't you admit the chance was worth taking?"

Bristol shook his massive head one more time, like a diver emerging from the depths. And then his eyes opened wide, to stare deep into Toby's Even now he was too proud to ask for pity, but there was a world of difference in his gruff whisper.

"This must go no further"

"I'm a doctor too. Won't you believe that now?"

Bristol stared back, unbending Then he turned coolly on his heel and faced the crowd beyond the garden wall "There's been a mistake," he rumbled "My daughter will recover That's all I'm concerned with now."

Toby smiled inwardly It was quite like Bristol to avoid personal onus for the error. But he could afford to concede the point.

"You'll save that tar for another occasion?"

The older doctor turned away, raising his voice to a stentor's bellow "Go home, all of you! You've disturbed the peace enough tonight"

Harvey Bristol's bellow, answering his father's out of the dark, trailed into a grotesque diminuendo as the same restraining hands pulled him back into darkness Even as Toby watched, the torches snuffed out one by one The crowd, beaten back by its master's voice, began to disperse with suspicious neatness As Gabriel Thatch had said, the Bristol bondsmen were well-trained The curious, lingering on the fringes, had begun to disperse, too, as the lanterns of the watch—issuing, by magic, from a dark street at the head of the square—bobbed in their midst There was a final volley of oaths, a scuffling in the sandy byway as a cudgel met a skull—then silence

Bristol turned back to Toby with averted eyes For the first time he noted the sag of the old man's shoulders, the droop of his heavy jaw

"How d'you know she'll live?"

"See for yourself, sir"

"I won't thank you for this night's work, Kent And I'm warning you that we're still enemies"

"That's only to be expected, isn't it?"

"May I have the—the evidence?"

Toby relinquished the covered basin The older doctor thrust it promptly into the capacious pocket of his tailcoat and bowed, still with averted eyes

"Will you see your daughter now?"

"I no longer have a daughter—only honor."

Their eyes met and held in earnest then, as Bristol mouthed

her wild avowal on this same stairway. But Roy's eyes were clear of doubts as he went on

"Strange, isn't it, that she should give way when it's all over?"

He turned up the hall on that, with the same tranquil smile, apparently oblivious of Toby's blank stare Toby, squaring his shoulders against an invisible threat, walked into the upstairs parlor

Nancy stood with one arm flung the length of the mantelpiece, her sleek copper head bent in thought She did not stir as he entered, though he could tell, by the quick stiffening of her back and shoulders, that she was instantly aware of his presence

"Shall we pick up our quarrel, Mrs Gregory?"

She lifted her eyes then, and he was aware of the shadows beneath the lids. And yet, despite the gaunt look she gave him, she had never seemed lovelier

"I'm afraid I can't remember just where we left off," he said.

"Nor can I, Doctor"

"Roy said you've a message for me"

"I'll state it briefly As you observed, I've jilted my fiancé, Harvey Bristol"

"Would I be impertinent if I congratulated you?"

"Extremely. You saw his worst side tonight."

"On that, Mrs Gregory, I'll reserve judgment."

"My reasons for jilting Mr Bristol are my own. However, you've the right to hear this much It wasn't a love match Our—our contract called for an immediate cash settlement on my part" She lifted her head proudly on that. "A settlement I was quite willing to make in return for the Bristol name"

"Why must you tell me this?"

"Because I've no way of meeting that obligation now. I've decided to drop my action against you."

"Does Judge Armstrong know?"

"He will be informed by letter Tomorrow I shall report at the warehouse office for—for any duty you care to assign me"

So far his voice had matched hers in coldness; he had spoken by rote, as his mind fumbled for the import of her news Now he forced himself to extend his hand.

"Thank you, Nancy"

"So far, Doctor, you've nothing to thank me for"

"You're giving me a chance to prove myself Don't think I'm not grateful"

Still, she did not appear to notice his extended hand.

"This is a truce, Dr. Kent. Let's not color it with sentiment"

"Can't we be friends while it lasts?"

"We'll be business associates, no more."

"But. Nancy——!"

"And our relationship does not include familiarity"

He watched his hand drop, of its own dead weight, and smiled ruefully "Why give me a chance at all?"

"After tonight, I feel you deserve it"

"But only an hour ago you said——"

"I'm human, Doctor—though you've some reason to think the contrary. I've changed my mind—to a point."

"So I'm on trial Is that it?"

"You were on trial today—aboard the flatboat And again tonight, when we talked in the loggia And a third time, when you defied Matthew Bristol And a fourth, when you faced him on the portico I must say you passed those four tests with a certain credit"

He watched her face avidly. praying for at least a ghost of a smile But Nancy's pale profile had all the rigidity of an actor's mask. "Including the flatboat?"

"Including the flatboat, Doctor."

"And our talk in the loggia?"

"You refused my bride I can tell you now that it was bait, pure and simple May I apologize for the subterfuge?"

He knew that he was flushing, and controlled his anger. "It seems you had little faith in me"

"Understand me clearly. You're still a stranger in our midst This is in no sense a welcome—only a reprieve I'm as confident as ever that you'll fail But I know, at least, that you're honest—and brave—as well as stubborn. You may prove me wrong if you can"

"In other words, I'm to have the full two years to hang myself"

"The full two years, Dr Kent I won't wish you luck."

"You're serious about wanting to help at the warehouse?"

"Believe me, you'd find my knowledge useful"

"Isn't it a bit irregular for a lady of your position to——"

"My position in Savannah depends entirely upon my purse," said Nancy "There, Doctor, is a fact that our postwar aristocracy should ponder"

"As the Bristols pondered it?"

"Precisely. Matthew Bristol is a diehard of the old regime, but he's no fool His practice here in Savannah will barely keep his estate together, even if it returns to prewar standards Naturally he'll do his best to ruin you—he wants the medical field to himself."

"I'm aware of that"

"Are you aware that I might side with him—and choose the Darby Company instead?"

"And may I translate that last remark for your benefit?"

"My remarks—and my loyalties—require no translation"

They were all but shouting now as she faced him at last Again he controlled his tone, though it cost him a real effort

"Don't deceive yourself, Mrs Gregory Your motives are more complex than you think May I diagnose them, as a good doctor should?"

"Continue I suppose I've deserved this"

"You deserve it richly Let's go back to the flatboat You came aboard from the lowest of feminine motives—curiosity and an itch for play-acting You were play-acting tonight when you tried to bribe me out of the company. How do I know you aren't acting now?"

"I'll admit most of that All but the last"

"Ladies of your sort have one drawback, Mrs. Gregory"

"And what can you know of ladies of my sort?"

"More than you think, perhaps I know that your whole life has been a ritual—so elaborate a performance that it has apparently dazzled the performer"

"Now I insist that you translate!"

"You'll believe you've done a gracious thing when you withdraw this lawsuit. Actually, you're withdrawing it because you can't help yourself Not after tonight"

"Believe me, I could have won it easily"

"That's another failing of the aristocrat, Mrs Gregory The belief that he's immortal, and invulnerable The blind certainty that he need only summon a judge, or an army, to have his way Our Revolution proved that two can play such games when it comes to armies We're making a new world here, from the ground up I'm part of that world, and I'm here to stay You know that in your heart. That's why you've stepped aside."

"I shall never step aside, Doctor."

"But you'll work for me tomorrow, on my terms And not vice versa. You can't withdraw that promise"

He watched the color flood her cheeks, and wondered why he could not take more pleasure in her rage "Perhaps we should say good night on that note," he said. "We'll have a long day tomorrow. The first of many, I'm afraid There's much to do, and so little time"

"I didn't think you'd gloat," she said, and her voice was little more than a hoarse whisper now

"Probably you'd be most useful at the ledgers," he said "Unless you feel such work's beneath you."

"I have said I kept my father's books. Why shouldn't I keep yours as well?"

"There'll be field trips, of course, when the crops come in. I'll rely on your company—and your advice."

"They are yours for the asking."

"We'd do better if we were friends."

"How can we be friends now?"

"Does the truth hurt so much, Nancy?"

He saw her wince at the question, and dared to press the point further. Spinning her with a hard hand on either shoulder, he forced her to face him one more time, forced her eyes to meet his for a long burning moment

"You wanted me on that barge—quite as much as I wanted you Next time you want me, will you be honest about it?"

He knew she would have struck him then, and let her struggle a moment more as he held her arms pinioned. "Don't be alarmed, I've no intention of kissing you. Or of forcing my friendship on you if it's unwanted. You may even strike me if it'll relieve your feelings" He released her then, and smiled into her eyes for a moment more, waiting for the blow that did not come

"Thank you for your chivalry, Doctor."

"Leave with the last word, if you like I'll give you that satisfaction."

"What's *your* last word, if I'm not presuming?"

"Only this, Nancy· being a lady is a lonely business sometimes You'll find it's pleasanter being alive"

"Is that my reward for joining the Darby Company?"

"You'll discover it yourself in time I shall await your awakening with interest"

Nancy Gregory drew herself erect "I'll keep your books, Doctor I'll correct your ignorance on our plantations—and in the drawing room. But I shall ignore your philosophy—and you"

She walked out on that, with her head still high, and he bowed her through the door, with his good humor intact. As a lady, she had had the last word after all—that was only fitting As a man, he had forced her to leave the field. The victory would content him, for the present

THREE • THE FIRST ACCOUNTING

THE aroma of prime tobacco leaf was still heavy in the air as Dr Tobias Kent, president of the Darby Company, reined in at the warehouse door. Now that the last bursting hogshead had rolled aboard the waiting flatboat, now that the last field hand had signed Sam Hoyt's hour book, the Darbyville landing had begun to drowse back to normal, it would continue to drowse until next month's preparation for next year's seeding He breathed in the peace through grateful pores as he inhaled the winy aroma of the tobacco itself It was the only reminder that these gaunt barns had hummed like so many beehives yesterday, as the last of a bumper crop was tamped home

He heard a murmur of voices within the largest warehouse and knew that the Savannah hands were still in line before Sam's table, to take the last of their wages Rising in his stirrups, he could look downstream and count the long line of barges, blurred in the spring heat haze as they swung into the bend They had nosed into the channel this morning, groaning with their precious loads Sixteen flatboats in all, tethered stem to stern like lazy argosies. . . Yes, it had been a banner year at Darbyville

In a few more hours those sixteen barges would begin to warp into their berths at the Darby dock in Savannah, under the windows of the depot office For some time now it had been Nancy Gregory's custom to count their harbor shipping as she worked at her desk beside those open windows He wondered what her emotions would be when she watched this synonym for gold pour into their headquarters

Certainly he had not questioned her industry—or her dedication—when this crop was in the making In the homespun dress he knew so well, her legs protected by hip boots against the acrid dust clouds in the fields, she had matched Sam Hoyt stride for stride as the endless files of hillocks were hoed and planted When the inevitable cutworms came with June, she had moaned as eloquently as Sam himself—and clucked just as vigorously when droves of turkeys were shooed along the rows to peck the intruders out

With Felix Pagnol as a slightly bewildered escort, she had brooded, with other watchers, on one of the stilted lookouts during a week of moonlit evenings, scanning each foot of this dark earth for the telltale larval moths that still betrayed the cutworm's presence among the plants beneath A score of field hands, with lanterns bobbing in their fists, had patrolled the rows that week, to stamp out the last vestige of the pest The moths, like monstrous white butterflies, their wings mere translucent traceries in the moonlight, had mocked such industry for a while Nancy, driving the hands from her perch as remorselessly as any overseer, had refused to return to Savannah until the last white ghost had vanished.

"Mais chérie——"

"Va-t-en! J'insiste."

"These men—they will work as well of you are dancing at the Merrick's ball."

"I'm spoiled for music, Felix, until the crop's in the ground, and flourishing. You must know by now that tobacco is as demanding as any mistress."

Toby had heard that much one night—there, in the shadow of a drying house—before he turned away to bellow orders of his own Half certain that the Frenchman had dropped an arm about Nancy's waist, he had forced himself to ignore the discovery, as he ignored the sick wave of jealousy that engulfed him Nancy Gregory, after all, was too valuable to the Darby Company now—valuable in ways that had no link with her sex

"Of course I can top, Doctor. What's more, I can train every green hand you've seen fit to recruit in town "

"I'd prefer you stay at the warehouse, Mrs Gregory. The bookkeeping——"

"Leave bookkeeping to your quill drivers. For the next week I belong in the fields."

She had proved that statement abundantly when the plants were tall enough to top—a pinching out of the bud that required an expert hand, as the topper worked down the waist-high rows Toby had paced her for a day, in the faint hope that she would tire. Actually, he had found he must put out all his strength to equal her record when they paused for the nooning At nightfall, when his own limbs were heavy with midsummer languor, Nancy Gregory had seemed fresh as ever

"Pray for dry weather and steady sun, Doctor. I've seldom seen finer leaves before priming time."

"Give our field hands some credit for that. *They* smell prosperity in the air, too, you know."

"If you refer to the fact that our tenants are working on shares——"

"Name a better incentive, Mrs. Gregory, and I'll broach it at the next tenant meeting."

But Nancy had shrugged off that challenge and returned to her work.

He could picture her now, from the firm thrust of her forearms in the bright green jungle of new tobacco leaves, to the coppery tendril—so out of key with that Amazonian moment—that escaped from the sunbonnet that hid her intent face from view. Pondering that memory, he could still curse the wall between them—and her casual refusal to step over, even for a moment. A few cold words on the progress of a crop, or a ship in mid-ocean, or a consignment of rice seed for Sangaree, was all she allowed herself in the brief moments when they were alone. He was certain that she wished for no more intimacy—no admission, even for an instant, that theirs was a human equation as yet unsolved.

Her last brief visits to Darbyville had followed that pattern rigidly. Priming time, when the tall tobacco was stripped of all but its finest leaves, was only another demonstration of her skill—and her ability to organize the field hands to even greater prodigies. The vigils in the drying barns, when the leaves, spread at long last on willow racks, cured slowly but surely in the wreathing fatwood smoke, was but a final challenge to her talent for slave-driving. Or so he told himself irritably—even as he admitted that the slaves in question had taken Miss Nancy's orders with perfectly good spirits.

He remembered those breathless autumn evenings now, when all Darbyville seemed to reek of black sweat and woodsmoke, and Nancy, as coolly assured as ever, had roamed from one drying barn to another like a restless beagle. She had all but checked the seasoning of each leaf with her own hands, and no one but a strong-lunged Negro could endure more than a half-hour of the inferno of a well-fired drying shed. Toby, who had already treated a dozen cases of peripneumonia in the sickbay he had established at the dockside, took a grim satisfaction in outstaying her on those visits. And an abiding pleasure in reviving her when she had been feminine enough to faint away as she stepped from smoke-hazed barn to open air.

True, Felix Pagnol's arms had been there to catch her as she fell. He had puzzled for days at the shocked concern in the Frenchman's eyes as they carried her between them to the sickbay. . . .

The long agony of the curing reached its climax when the trays were taken to the packhouse. Here the leaves were tied

into tightly bunched hands and tamped into the waiting hogsheads This time Nancy had contented herself with checking her books against the jottings of the inspectors, those all-important guardians of the public weal, who appeared magically to weigh each barrel and certify its contents Prized down by the great, ox-driven tamps, coopered by the first day's packing. But even Toby's jaw had dropped when Nancy presented the final figures just before the loading

"A thousand pounds average for each barrel, Doctor. We can sell without springing a hoop. The Darby brand will take care of that "

"I bow to the Darby brand, Mrs Gregory. In the past few months you have helped me to understand the reasons for its excellence."

"I think we can dispense with compliments."

"Even when they spring from the heart?"

"I offer you these figures as part of my duties. Will you accept them in the same spirit?"

"If my enthusiasm seems tempered, you know the reason."

"Explain that, if you please "

"There's a fortune in this crop—and a fortune in British bills of exchange You've given me the estimated figures to the last sovereign Does it make your spirit sink to see how rich we're getting?"

Still in the saddle, knowing that he must enter the warehouse in another moment and address the Darby tenant group, he chuckled as he recalled the blaze of color at her cheek. To say nothing of the great dust-laden belling of her skirts as she sailed across the warehouse like a thwarted duchess—a simile that lost none of its force in homespun masquerade. Those hands would recover their magic whiteness soon enough, those long, taut fingers, roughened, now, after weeks in the field, would learn to play Mozart again at the spinet in the townhouse parlor while Pagnol dawdled on the facing loveseat

Toby had yielded to that green surge of hatred then, he let it sweep over him one more time today as he hesitated at the warehouse door and shook his fist at a fate he could not name Then, pushing her image behind him firmly, he swung down from the saddle and strode in to face his deputies

After the dust-laden sunlight of the loading platform, the barn was a cool cave still redolent of its precious store. Toby blinked in the grateful half-light, picking out faces by instinct There, riding above the others like a triumphant planet among its satellites, was Sam Hoyt's sweatstained visage, the brow still puckered over the last disbursements to the Savannah hands, the lips parted in a beatific grin as he contemplated

the stack of gold coins remaining in the two canvas bags on his counting table There was Hiram Grant, the Darby factor at Red Creek, an ancient Darby bondsman who had long since owned a quarter section and fifteen slaves, but preferred to class himself as a tenant still.

There, side by side with Hiram, was the young bondsman Timothy Granger, whose speech still showed a noble Scottish burr, whose thrift would buy up his articles this spring There were the three Munger brothers, mudsill farmers wise in the tricks of the tobacco plant. The vast Randy clan—he counted a baker's dozen without pausing over names—who had come down from the high barrens behind Cagle Hundred to share in this banner planting. The mingling of Gages and Clintons, of Tarletons and Moors and Effinghams, of Clays and Tylers and Camerson—names on the Darby ledgers, though their sun-weathered country faces were as familiar as his own Tenants and small owners, factors and bound boys who had grown to man's estate on Georgia earth, under the Darby aegis Friends who waited with wide country eyes as he opened the papers in his wallet and prepared to give his accounting.

"I wish I had the gift of language, gentlemen I wish I could tell you how pleased I am with my news—which you have all made possible."

"Tell us anyhow, Toby. We're right good at listenin' "

Toby returned the speaker's grin "I'll do my best, Clint" One of the most heartening features of this harvest was their ease with each other, the knowledge that he was one of them The use of nicknames was only a natural extension of that fellowship Dr. Tobias Kent had been Toby to his tenants from the start—with no loss of authority.

"I needn't rehearse the terms under which we're working I'm sure you know them by heart, along with your expected shares Still, it'll do no harm to state 'em briefly—if only to wipe that grin from Sam Hoyt's face *He's* planning to take that bag of sovereigns back to Savannah—and settle your field wages later, when we've figured the exact amount of our profits *I'm* planning to pay those wages now, in cash money—and give you all due bills for your profits, payable in goods or cash at the Darby depot."

He paused on that, aware that he was making a speech of sorts, encouraged by the intent interest around him. Sam's face had changed, as predicted Sam, a hard-headed bookkeeper, for all his ideas of equality, would never have promised gold in advance And yet Nancy's own books had shown that the hogsheads were already as good as sold, the hard British sovereigns on deposit to the Darby credit in Liver-

pool. These were his people, all of them Why should they lack their money when there was a surplus to pay them?

"London agents, as you know, are waiting now in Savannah to bid on our hogsheads We'll sell enough to them to keep our ships in the clear. I still plan to send two boatloads of prime leaf direct to Liverpool, aboard the *Jupiter* and the *Sachem Queen*——"

A voice, far back in the barn, interrupted, amid deep-throated laughter. "Are they smoking American tobacco in Whitehall?"

"They smoked it during the war—when they could buy it. They'll go on smoking it, even if we must fight our way into their ports "

Clint shifted his chew and spoke again "We don't worry how the money's spent, Toby We trust you "

"You should know how we plan to sell the leaf, at least. I'm afraid I can't tell you about the rice planting at Sangaree That's Sam's province. I must learn it from scratch " He did not add that he expected Nancy Gregory, not Sam Hoyt, to be his teacher

Nancy would be furious, of course, when she learned that he had disposed of the tobacco profits in advance Nancy had complained, more than once, at his open-handed distribution of the company funds before the company's profits were actually banked And yet, access to easy money was Georgia's crying need, as of today He had only to look beyond the confines of the Darby Company—and count the applications at the depot—to know how high their stock had risen. To know it was thanks to that same open-handed insistence that all who cared to work were welcome

True, there had been setbacks The flood that had razed a good hundred acres of timberland, on the bluff above Clay Creek, sending both land and potential lumber into spinning ruin, on the spring crest of the Savannah The loss of two vessels at sea, both deep-laden with naval stores and Indies rum He had yet to learn if they had gone down under pirate gunfire or British cannon, the British, those avid sea wolves, still greased their war wounds with a prize here and there—and swore, by all their codes, that they were only salvaging British property.

So far it had been worth the risk to deal openly with the honest merchants of Liverpool and Brest . . . He came back to what he was saying, aware that he had been reading figures from a list with only half his mind on their import.

Nancy Gregory, to whom figures were a form of poetry, would have lingered on each fraction with relish He damned

Nancy adequately before he tossed the list to Sam and went into his peroration

"I won't say that the company is safe after one season We must *take* the good with the bad A banner yield at Darbyville must balance an upcountry flood, a good rice crop must pay for losses at sea. But I will say that I couldn't be prouder of the way you've rolled these hogsheads I hope *you'll* be half as proud of *us*—when the cash is banked in London"

He made his exit to applause, like a good performer, shaking whatever hands he could grasp en route As always, there was no time to visit, he was overdue in Savannah now, and Nancy's ledgers were waiting for his final audit

A slave had taken his horse to the stable behind the wharf. He walked straight to the dock end and swung a leg across the flatboat rail, noting, with no surprise, that this was the same flatboat he had used for his journey down river from Augusta Landmarks from the past had a way of losing themselves in the haze these days He had had little time to lift his eyes from the straight road he must follow—or to wonder if he would recognize his destination

It had seemed inevitable on that first journey—an objective clear-cut as an operation he had performed a score of times. It was fantastic—and he noted the date a second time as he settled at his traveling desk in the latticed after house and opened one of Sam's inevitable account books—that it was just a year to the day that he had taken Nancy Gregory in his arms

ii

"Will it work, Doc—really?"

Despite the prodigal disbursement of hard gold coin, Sam had been affable enough while they checked their accounts on the trip down river Now, with Savannah's bluff looming dead ahead, and the sweeps already calling their warnings to the thickening river traffic, his question seemed a logical finale to their wrestle with that invincible enemy, arithmetic

Toby even managed a grin as he mopped his forehead and slammed the accounting face down on the battered writing desk Tired as he was (and it was astounding how tired he could be and still go on working) he could never resist Sam's good humor for long Or Sam's belief that the Revolution had reached its triumph in the Darby Company, and would so continue in the best of all worlds

"Answer that for yourself. The money's flowing in like water."

"And flowing out a little faster, if these figures mean anything."

"Does that sort of flow disturb you too much?"

Sam permitted himself a deep sigh. "That's Sam Hoyt's conscience rumbling—not Sam Hoyt himself. *I* think money was meant to be used by the most people, not hoarded by the few. Come down to cases, Doc, I think that's what we fought for. Britain was sucking us dry, and giving nothing back. Now the tidewater Tories would like to take over where Threadneedle Street left off. Combines like the Darby Company feed both the back country and tidewater—without Tory help. If it really succeeds, it'll prove the Tories are dead ducks. Maybe, in time, it'll be a synonym for Georgia."

"Spoken like a true Federalist, Sam. I wish I had your optimism."

"*Will* it work, Doc? What d'you think, really?"

"So far, I've been too busy to think."

"You're the president. If it bothers you to see the surplus melting, clamp down. Don't pay a share until the cash is banked on Bull Street."

"Our tenants must eat in the meantime, and feed their slaves."

"Sow belly and grits were good enough for my father between harvests. Old Victor paid his tenants as he saw fit."

"Would you like me to do that?"

"I'm proud as hell you don't, Toby."

Toby grinned in earnest. "Then I can believe just one thing. Our chief supervisor has been working on you recently."

"If you mean Miss Nancy——"

"Who else would I mean? She'll expect us to bring back eight thousand pounds in gold after we've paid off the hands. What'll she say, when she learns it's been divided among our tenants, as an advance on profits?"

"You'll take that tongue-lashing, Doc—not I. It's one of the penalties of being president."

"Should I take it to heart?"

Sam considered his answer. "Miss Nancy is a good bookkeeper."

"And an excellent tobacco farmer."

"Whether you believe this or not, she means well. When it comes to business, she's clever as any man. Why can't you two bury the hatchet?"

"You know why, Sam."

The head overseer sighed deeply. Traveling as they did, from the most remote upcountry wood lot to the branch bureaus that Toby had established in Charleston and Havana, they had become fast friends. Just as inevitably, Toby had poured out his resentment a dozen times.

"She must realize that you were born for this job."

"I was born to hold a scalpel and work with Roy. Don't think I wouldn't resign to her tomorrow, if——" Toby paused, astounded that the thought had escaped him so readily.

"If you were convinced she could do better?"

"I believe she could make money as fast as I. Probably a good deal faster. But Old Victor insisted that this experiment be given a trial. I can't let the Darby millions go back into a few pairs of hands—not until I'm convinced they're less useful in mine. Yours. Anyone who's willing to work and make them grow."

"Be honest with the girl, Doc. You expected her to dislike you."

"Not for a solid year."

"Ladies can be a proud lot when they put their mind to it. And a stubborn lot. Still, she's helped you—and the company—all she could."

Toby struck fist to palm. He had been pacing the deck for some moments now, glaring alternately at the teeming river shipping and Sam's bland countenance. "When I explain that I'm merely implementing her father's wishes—when I say that the *whole* Darby empire is prospering, she merely shrugs, and goes back to her ledgers."

"You've lived long enough to know you can't change your nature—if you're born in a box, you take the shape of that box. Miss Nancy's trouble is that she's a lady, plus a brain. And a father who let her develop that brain——" Sam paused to consider a memory all his own. "I can remember how shocked Savannah was when she rode out with me for the first time to see how we brought in a crop. And how Wright Square turned up its eyebrows when Old Victor gave her a catboat, and encouraged her to sail it alone."

"And still, she could do no wrong. Is that it?"

Again Sam considered his answer. "I shouldn't step out of my place to say this. But in my opinion Victor Darby made a mistake, educating his daughter. Ladies shouldn't be educated, if they're to remain ladies. If that's nonsense, make the most of it."

"I'd say it was a very profound remark."

"He should have educated her *all* the way or not at all. Let her understand, from the first, that she was to inherit the business, on condition she'd back Roy as a doctor." Sam chuckled, with no real mirth. "I'd reckon Old Victor belonged to his century, after all—specially where his daughter was concerned. Seems he was smart enough to know she'd catch a husband sooner if he didn't grant her too much power."

"Apparently the formula worked," said Toby drily.

For the thousandth time he tried hard to picture Nancy

Darby Gregory on her wedding night, in the arms of the dashing George—and failed Nancy as the virago who could shout ruin without speaking above a whisper—or the Nancy who could impersonate her own serving maid with relish—seemed far more real.

"What's to become of her now—when she's jilted young Bristol and can't best me?"

"Use your eyes, Toby. If she can't get back the reins, she'll marry Pagnol Why else would he linger a whole year in this corner of America when he could be tumbling a queen in Paris?"

"So Miss Nancy can't lose. Don't ask me to rejoice for her"

Toby walked to the bow of the flatboat on that, before he betrayed himself. The sweeps had just begun to warp inshore to fetch the Darby dock, a tedious maneuver that must begin a good two hundred yards upstream, to nurse the last thrust of the current Once again he stared hard at Savannah For the past year the aloof welcome had hardly changed where this interloper was concerned Yet he was part of Savannah now, a contributor to its lifeblood, the growing city could not repel him forever, however Nancy Gregory and Matthew Bristol, each in his respective camp, might scheme against him

I'm your lover, my girl, he told the high green serenity of The Bay, and the massed, sun-warmed roofs beyond I've been your lover from the first I'll conquer you on my own terms before we're done In the meantime, I'll not stoop to buy your favors Nor will I compromise my dream—or is it Victor Darby's dream?—with your rulers Come what may, you're well worth saving from those aged paramours

Then, since he was president of the Darby Company, as well as knight-errant, he turned to more practical matters The topsails of the *Darby Belle,* beating upstream against the tide, deep-laden with Sheffield-forged type for Gabriel Thatch's printshop—he counted the spars, by rote, and blessed his luck that this vessel, at least, had come out of London's Pool to cross the Atlantic unscathed The Darby ensign, floating proudly above the warehouse at the cliff's base, a sign that the tobacco auction was still in progress The gleam of sunlight on fresh-cut pine, where the Darby ramp joined The Bay, at the top of the bluff—heartening evidence that the wing of the Darby hospital, a long time in building, thanks to the spring rains, was a reality at last

Hard against the string piece, to balance the picture, he saw the gutted hall of the *Golden Fleece,* the schooner they had dared to send down the inland waterway on the Havana

run. Surprised by pirates in the dark, as she made the turn at the St Marys buoy, the *Golden Fleece* seemed little more than a skeleton now The shipwrights had been forced to strip down her 'tween-decks and step her masts before they could properly repair the aftermath of that murderous onslaught

Toby stared hard at the hulk before he vaulted from flat-boat to dock With Nancy's ledgers waiting, it was a salutary reminder The former colonies might fumble their way toward an uneasy prosperity here at home. Until the sea lanes were open, and the pirates blasted from their hidden bays, profits would be a gamble at best

"We must put guns aboard all our merchantmen, Sam"

"Have you any notion what a first-class swivel mount costs in England?"

"You've told me often enough. Perhaps we can sail in convoy No one has challenged the *Jupiter* so far. Or the *Sachem Queen.*"

"Ex-privateers, both How long will the American Navy allow us to put to sea with a double tier of gun ports?"

"Until the American Navy has bottoms of its own," said Toby, "it'll rely on its citizens to protect themselves as best they can" He swallowed the rest. Sam was a fellow Federalist, after all There was little point in rehearsing the reasons that kept these thirteen fledgling states from asserting their identity as a nation on the high seas.

"Where will you go first, Toby?"

The practical query brought him to earth instantly As always, when they set foot on the Savannah wharf after a trip upriver, the backlog of unfinished work appeared, tangible as a clerk plucking at one's elbow. The figures on the spring planting at Sangaree—rice seed, as Nancy had remarked more than once, was worth its weight in British gold The unfinished tobacco auction in the depot across the wide, bustling wharf The neat rows of figures awaiting him in his private office, just inside those dusty windows, crowning the bluff. . . . Nancy herself, all in muslin, with her hair in a severe chignon and her sleeves protected by paper bookkeeper's cuffs, waiting just outside the office door, like Nemesis in person

"I'll take the office today, Sam Will you take the auction?"

He watched enviously while the overseer stumped across the main dock and entered the tobacco shed Even from where he stood he could hear the chant of the auctioneers A musical sing-song that was gibberish to the outlander, it spelled riches for the Darbys The bids, counterpointing this tonic harmony, all but rattled the wide tin roofs Toby rejoiced in the dominance of the cockney twang—he had hoped the British factors would turn out in force today Those snuff-brown men, with

their knobbed canes and their bulging wallets, had paid top prices from the first Their brisk bidding had been matched—and driven even higher—by factors from Paris and Rotterdam and New York

A week ago he would have turned over his other tasks to Sam and gone to make notes on the outskirts of the crowd. Today, with the success of the auction assured, he forced his weary feet to ascend the ramp that led from dockside to The Bay.

As he climbed, the tidal reach of the river opened below him like a blue-brown scroll A great half-moon of harbor, the anchorage was enclosed on the north by Hutchinson's Island, on the south by the curving bluff of Savannah itself; greening rice paddies and oleander-crowned bluff seemed to merge in the heat haze at both ends of the bustling picture

He had never seen the harbor more crowded At first glance a tall, sea-going vessel seemed to be tugging at each buoy offshore The Darby quayside, which handled the bulk of freight for all foreign ports, though other docks had begun to challenge it on both sides, was black with shipping, clamorous with the shouts of huskies busy with a dozen loadings.

Between the docks, clinging like birds' nests to the bluff itself, or walking on stilted legs into the shallows, the shanties of Muskrat Town made a grotesque if lively pattern in the bright spring sunlight Muskrat Town, so named by the more fortunate denizens of the airy bluff just above, was a self-contained, raffish world A place of brawls and crazy-angled, mud-stained doorsills Of catfish lines and clots of bobbing skiffs Of shrill-voiced children and cadaverous mothers Of bearded fishermen, oystermen, dock wallopers. Of brash poverty and stenches beyond belief

Toby, who had walked every inch of Muskrat Town for a full year, in the interests of Roy's clinic, had learned to ignore the stench long ago, along with the tumbled squalor. Ignoring it now, as he mounted to cleaner air, he could still pause to wonder how this mudsill village could be lifted by its own greasy bootstraps—how it could be fed and clothed and taught self-respect

Or must there be a Muskrat Town on the doorstep of every Utopia? He shrugged off that imponderable for more pressing concerns as he turned into the Darby offices atop the bluff

Nothing about this square, unpretentious building advertised the fact that it was the heart of the company The scratch of clerks' pens on the ground floor, the soft-voiced catechism of old Leary, the head bookkeeper, as he compared his figures with those of a junior, were part of its easy-paced repose. Toby would have felt strange in a more hectic air.

Today, he accepted the scraping bows and Leary's too-elaborate good evening with his usual nod These quill drivers respected him now, thank Heaven, they could do no less, with the first year's figures locked in the bookshelves behind Leary's pulpit desk But there was no warmth in their sallow smiles, no welcome in their eyes, in their hearts, they had refused to accept him, even now, as more than a temporary master

Here, too, was another imponderable—the minions of the rich, who rebelled, almost as instinctively as the rich themselves, against the slightest change in status Nancy's daily presence in the big room upstairs, of course, was a constant reminder of older—and, to them, better—days A hopeful augury that those days would return.

Toby prayed that he had not scowled openly at Leary as he climbed the stair to his own desk and settled wearily behind it

iii

His desk top was painfully neat, both Leary and Nancy saw to that Nancy's workroom adjoined his own. He noted, with a small tightening of his heart, that the connecting door stood wide, a sure sign that she was absent Obeying a quick impulse, he ignored the notes awaiting him on his own desk and strode in to discover, if he could, how she had passed her day

The two offices, roomy, many-windowed, book-lined, were of equal size, and heavy with identical Chippendale desks and matching armchairs Both faced the harbor through tall windows; both, thanks to the fact that the building stood directly on the bluff's edge, had a kind of airy isolation between sky and roadstead Sam's quarters, a cluttered attic on the floor above, was reached only by the central stairwell, Roy's own office, a courtesy item adjoining Toby's, was little more than a cupboard masquerading as a room Roy's real domain was the hospital they had just finished building—over Nancy's protests—across the way.

At the first directors' meeting Toby had insisted that he and Nancy have equal space As he discovered later, the offices they both occupied had once been the quarters of Old Victor himself Simply by building a wall, with a connecting door, he had apportioned their working areas to the foot Now, as always, he could not help noticing how lived in this room was compared to his own austere retreat Even the casual visitor would have known instantly that this was a woman's room It was an aura that went beyond the spray of dogwood on one bookshelf. The antimacassars on the armchairs The small stitched pillows that graced the sofa The

soft French water colors—Paris from the bluff of Montmartre, an apple orchard in Normandy—on facing walls.

No one puts flowers on *my* bookshelves, he thought No one minds if my armchair is comfortable, or my walls bare as a monk's cell. Only the Founder's aged brass telescope, squatting like a cannon, its tripod just inside his windows, gave his quarters a personal note. . He banished the childish complaint and walked twice around Nancy's claw-footed mahogany desk before he yielded to temptation and glanced at the note on the blotter. Hating himself for spying, he read it through twice, before the three French sentences could register in his brain.

MIGNONNE·
Je t'attendrai au bord de l'eau Même heure, même endroit. Ne sois pas tard, je t'implore. .

FELIX

So Pagnol was meeting her at the river's edge, at a spot that implied other rendezvous Like a model lover, he implored her to be prompt. What did it matter to that Paris dilettante if she left her desk in the middle of a working-day?

Stamping back to his own desk, Toby wondered if Nancy had left the note exposed deliberately, in the brazen hope that he would read it—and curse her for dallying So far, she had not stooped so low But this was the first time that he, driven by a jealous compulsion he did not dare name, had rifled her letters. . .

He found he was racing through his own corespondence without reading a word, and forced his mind back to the sober verities of remittances, bills of sale, freight lists from Halifax to Havana Here was a plea from Philadelphia, for naval stores and lumber—all the yellow pine they could ship, to repair the ravages of another fire in the city on the Delaware Here, flagrant as always, was a ransom demand, signed by the Brothers of the Coast, promising free conduct for all Darby sloops in return for a percentage of their cargoes . . . Here, and he had ceased smiling at these missives long ago, was an anonymous, poison-pen squiggle, signed a Son of Savannah, accusing him as Darby's bastard, and promising instant exposure, if he did not return to the upcountry woods, where he belonged

Here, oddly civilized, between the last two letters, was another note in Pagnol's hand. A plea in meticulous English on a subject that Toby knew almost as well, now, as blackmail and libel:

My Dear Dr Kent

One more time, may I expect you as my Guest, at the last pre-Lenten cotillion at the Filature? I need not add what Pleasure it would give this Visitor to your Shores to face down the Stares of Savannah, with you beside me! And, while we cannot precisely Dance together (a gesture that would carry Defiance to its ideal climax) I think I can promise you at least one partner

Yr humble, obdt, etc

Felix Pagnol

Toby stared at the note for a moment before he struck his tinder gun and burned it Granted, it was churlish to cancel out his answer in advance, the Frenchman could hardly expect an answer now, after so many refusals Even if Pagnol's motives were inspired by kindness, and Toby could hardly believe that their visitor would act so simply, acceptance was out of the question

If this is pride, he thought, let these Savannah die-hards make the most of it If they wish to include me in their society—and I know that nothing is farther from their wishes—let them come to me For the same reason, he had vetoed Martha's plans for dinner parties and declined her own invitation to the last two balls at the Filature One soirée at the house on Wright Square had been humiliation enough for him

Behind the defiance he could glimpse the shadow of Felix Pagnol and sense the Frenchman's impish grin To Pagnol, Savannah's refusal to open its doors would have been a challenge, not a barrier The storming of this social bastion, to him, would have been a feat of arms no less exciting than taking an enemy redoubt Toby sighed, and turned away from that nimble picture Pagnol, after all, could exist without labor, thanks to his ancestors' bounty Unlike Dr Tobias Kent, he was sparkling with vitality at the day's end, unlike that upcountry visitor, Pagnol could never really imagine that he was unwanted

He returned to his correspondence and turned over the last bulky item in the stack—a long list of figures, in Nancy's neat hand, with a note, from the same writer, pinned to the top sheet

April 9, 1785

Dr Kent

Pray observe that our Total Income, for the first year of the Darby Company, exceeds Expenditures by seven thousand, eight hundred and sixty-three pounds, sterling (Computations are made in that Medium, since the Bulk of our assets are in terms of British gold) The Darby Company has always settled for Specie, or negotiable paper, and I must congratulate you, as President, for your Adherence to that policy—and your commendable Refusal to deal in American Currency, until we can be sure that such Currency has an established Value . .

Toby smiled, despite his weariness It was quite like Nancy Gregory to insert a short homily on finance in a treasurer's report. Taken in conjunction with her ironic compliment, it revealed the least attractive side of her mind, in all its bookkeeper's austerity She was right, of course, as right as any bookkeeper could be

At the outset of their venture Sam Hoyt had predicted a loss of at least ten thousand pounds for their first year, the company had earned almost eighty. If Nancy was more surprised than Sam by their good fortune, there was no hint of surprise in these coldly fashioned sentences:

> As Treasurer-in-fact of our Enterprise, I must warn you that Luck has been with us this first year, in Abundant Measure And I must earnestly counsel you to hold this sum Inviolate, against future Losses . .

He laughed aloud at the pious warning She would learn soon enough that he had distributed those profits, almost to the last shilling, among the Darby tenants Come what may, he thought, they'll have something to show for this experiment in co-operation, even if the directors—and that includes you, Mrs Gregory—must labor gratis Even if catastrophe strikes in our second year, there'll be better food than turnip tops in a hundred upcountry larders. . He watched his fist beat out that promise on his desk top, and knew that he had all but spoken it aloud

Nancy's final paragraph was an antidote to this habit of self-soliloquy that had plagued him of late.

> I will not wish you more Luck, Doctor, when Luck has played so large a part in your present Enterprise Nor will I praise you for your stalwart support of Common Men It was always my father's wish that Common Men on his lands should be Well-Housed and Fed—and you are too honest not to implement his Wishes, within the Company However, since you must continue to operate in Savannah, may I suggest a certain *rapport* between yourself and the Unregenerate Rich of this cty—whose support, after all, is essential to our ultimate Success? And may I further suggest, as a start, that you appear at the next Filature Ball, suitably garbed, with Manners to Match?

So Nancy had conspired with Pagnol to force his attendance at the cotillion. Surely she must realize that this casual suggestion, dropped in as a kind of impertinent after-thought on the company's balance sheet, could only goad him into an instant refusal Even if it were kindly meant . . .

He let the wild hope burn away instantly He had lost his heart, and all that ancient metaphor implied, to a woman who was as incapable of kindness as she was unattainable The

aristocrat, in the worst sense, clinging to her privileges to the end. The lady in the manner born, who could dare to order him about, like a lackey

He found that he was writing furiously, though he had no memory of applying pen to paper:

> MRS GREGORY
>
> In acknowledging your excellent Treasurer's Report on our first yr's Venture, may I thank you both for its Completeness, and its Common-sense? I am grateful, in particular, that we show a Surplus, for Sam will tell you that our disbursements today at Darbyville have absorbed our Profits to date, as we enter our Second Year I offer no Explanation nor Apology for same, since I am sure you would understand neither
>
> As for your suggestion that I come capering to the Filature . .

Toby stared gloomily at the unfinished sentence Silence, in this instance, would be the most cutting rejoinder Let her reissue the invitation verbally, if she dared Or question his decision to distribute profits For twelve months more he was president of the Darby Company, and his decisions were absolute

He ripped the letter paper to shreds and burned them above his wastebasket, letting the ashes fall on the ruins of Felix Pagnol's note They could mock his gaucherie together if they liked, the bitter fact remained that he would be too tired for cotillions tomorrow, too busy to recall that he was alive

He stood swaying for an instant at the windows, before he pushed the glass wide and breathed deep of the hot salt aroma of the harbor He was in time to see Nancy's catboat dance across the wake of a departing merchantman Watching the trim white sail hug the wind as the little vessel spun away for open water, he envied the helmsman an easy escape from a workaday world Even before the boom came about he guessed that Nancy herself was at the tiller, he had seen that sloop-rigged cat bobbing at her anchorage too often to mistake her lines now, though the distance was too great to permit instant recognition of the girl at the helm

Again his actions were quite automatic Old Victor's telescope was in his hand, its barrel swinging on the tall tripod, its lens bringing sloop and helmsman into vivid focus

She was all in white muslin today, save for the gipsy bandanna that partially confined her wind-whipped hair She was laughing as he had never seen her laugh, and talking with animation to an unseen passenger in the cockpit He could guess that passenger's identity even before he lifted a reproving hand and patted the helmsman's knee

It was quite like Pagnol, to loll thus, permitting the lady

of his choice to do the steering. And quite like Nancy Gregory to flaunt her seamanship, and her conquest, before all Savannah harbor. Including the president of the Darby Company, whose telescope clung to her course as though it would never release her.

Toby saw her look back, just before the catboat took the starboard tack for Hutchinson's Island and Sangaree. For an instant he had the insane conviction that she had noticed the glint of sunlight on that ancient telescope, and guessed that he was spying from his office window. Perhaps she had sailed under the lens deliberately, hoping that he would notice her . . . The catboat heeled in the wind. The boom came about as the mainsail blotted skipper and passenger from his sight. The president of the Darby Company, bringing his telescope inboard, slammed his office window with a violence that shook each leaded pane.

He stalked out of the depot without a backward glance or a thought for the staring clerks in the countinghouse downstairs. At the moment he could rejoice that Roy was out on country calls today, at least there would be work waiting for him at the clinic. Real work, to blot out thought, until it was time to join Gabriel Thatch for dinner at Tondee's Tavern . . . Yes, it was good to turn his back on this world of ledgers, to walk into a world where he was known, and wanted.

iv

He had lingered for a while in the last of the clinic wards, to chat with Maum Bonnie, the huge Negro midwife who ruled over their maternity cases, he had even paused for a half-hour in the redolent depths of Roy's dispensary, to check their account books down to the last pestle of Peruvian bark. Then, as he had known he would do from the first, he had dashed off the note to Martha Darby, sent it, via Billy, to the house on Wright Square. Now that he had crossed that Rubicon, he could set his jaw at the proper angle and walk out to face Savannah in the gathering dusk.

He could find no one to quarrel with tonight. Thanks to the nearness of the dinner hour, and the tendency of gentlemen to whet their appetites beforehand, The Bay was all but deserted. So was Bull Street, the wide thoroughfare that bisected the town from north to south. He paced it slowly, bracing himself against the first hostile stare and forcing himself to bow, nonetheless. To the dowager Mrs. Bayliss, who had been an earl's daughter once, and had become one of the clinic's first paying patients only a week ago. To the aged Dr. Tyree, who was dean of the local medical academy, and

resembled a well-shaved walrus. Old Tyree's bow was all but civil tonight. Could it be that he was resigned to losing a few of his patients to younger men—even to back-country upstarts?

There, on the next corner, was Tondee's, its low, rambling bulk a comforting silhouette in the twilight. He paused at the taproom door to breathe in the still more comforting aroma of rum punch. Following a familiar custom, he let his fingers trace the saber cut that dented the signboard above—one of several scars to remind one that a Revolution had once been proclaimed in Tondee's long dining room upstairs.

The signboard swung lazily in the sea breeze that so often invaded the Savannah at sunset. The breeze had a mournful note tonight—it spoke of ghosts in deep gardens, of hopes deferred, of dreams that had died too long ago to be worth remembering. Was the dream of equality one of those vagrant ghosts? Toby let his shoulder spring the inn door and walked into the taproom with his eyes fixed on the great wine tun above the bar. He had kept rendezvous with lost dreams of his own, here in this smoky room, in the twelvemonth that had just gone by. He hoped that Gabriel would be waiting in their usual corner, between the chimney and the scoured copper plate of the serving bar.

But the journalist was late tonight. Toby settled in their place, lifted a clay pipe from the rack beside the hearth, and tamped the honest Georgia leaf into the bowl. His tension eased as the first aureole of smoke reached his nostrils. He could even stare back at the taproom and wait for the challenges that no longer came.

The room was crowded tonight, but Toby had a clear view of Colonel Crowther at the bar, fighting the Cowpens for the hundredth time in the polite ear of young Jim Thorne, the apprentice lawyer from Augusta. Toby let his eyes brush the boy's, and smiled thinly as young Thorne turned away. He had suspected for some time that his meeting with the would-be barrister—on that misty euphemism, the field of honor—had been planned by Matthew Bristol.

The duel had been plotted well enough. Thorne had come down river from the piny woods with a reputation for marksmanship and a burning desire to succeed in the law. Old Bristol had made room for the newcomer—with suspicious alacrity—in his son's chambers shortly after Harvey Bristol's mysterious departure for England. Old Bristol had seen to it that the boy's advancement was rapid. Young Thorne had lost no time in calling out the president of the Darby Company, on the flimsiest of pretexts. *Quid pro quo:* a law prac-

tice for a dead enemy. Or so Toby had reasoned, when Thorne's glove had stung his cheek at that same bar.

They had met the next day under the pines in the Jewish Cemetery Gabriel, who had acted as Toby's second, had already locked up his presses, with an account of the affair that predicted young Thorne's wound exactly. Savannah had gasped as it read the account with its morning tea—at the precise moment that Thorne's limp body was being trundled into Matthew Bristol's consulting room, with a lead pellet lodged neatly in his biceps

There had been a second meeting, with one Lieutenant Bazelton, sometime officer in His Majesty's Army, now a kind of overseer on one of Bristol's upriver plantations Again Gabriel's paper had named the wound ahead of time, again Toby's adversary had left the ground feet first and bellowing for a surgeon's probe From that moment bluebloods and bullies had left the president of the Darby Company to his own devices

"At your favorite pastime, Toby?"

Gabriel's walking stick slapped the table as he spoke Gabriel's fashionable black tricorn swooped beside it like a homing crow, as the journalist settled on the facing bench. As usual, he exhaled good spirits—a blend of jauntiness, arrogance, and high-grade brandy.

"Stop me if I'm wrong, but you were busy hating someone just then Who was it this time? Old Matthew? Pagnol? Nancy? Or would you prefer to hate her in bed?"

"Frankly, I'd sooner bed a wildcat"

"May Eros forgive you a thumping lie, Tobias Kent And you needn't hide that blush. I won't bait you too far tonight. Instead, I'll show you a proof sheet of my leading article for tomorrow Read it carefully—it may improve your spirits."

Gabriel tossed the smudged paper on the table between them Toby read it twice before he could quite credit his eyes Gabe's flowing style, polemical as always, had seldom framed a proposition more artfully Savannah, he noted, was about to hold a special election, to appoint a health officer for both port and town, a list of candidates would be posted in the next fortnight That list, said Gabriel, should be reduced to one name

"If you think these nabobs would consider *me*——"

"Manhood suffrage may still be a dream in our democracy," said Gabriel. "However enough property holders in Savannah know what you've done with that clinic on The Bay And how you persuaded the Association to rat-proof every cellar on that same street And what you'd do to police

Muskrat Town itself, if you could vote down the Bristol clique."

"Don't they control the Savannah vote as well as the Medical Association?"

"Not these days, my friend. Even in our fair metropolis there are now more voters than gentlemen."

Toby grinned wanly. "Which means, of course, that you've hopes of electing me."

"I'm promising you the post if you'll take it. It's a club to beat out Bristol's brains, once you've learned to swing it properly. How can you refuse?"

"Unfortunately, I've no time to fight Matthew Bristol."

"You've nothing else, if you'll stop playing the merchant prince. The company's running smoothly now. Leave it in peace—it'll go on ticking like Victor Darby's best clock."

"So will Nancy Gregory, worse luck."

"What d'you know of Nancy, really?"

"Little enough, I'll grant you. I've tried for a solid year to understand her. All she'll do in return is quote figures to prove that I'm ruining us all."

"I'm not at all sure you've tried. My guess is you've done nothing but moon at her from a distance, after a rather bad start." Gabriel chuckled as Toby's jaw fell. "You've been seen too often, wandering our streets like a homeless tomcat, when she happens to spend a night at Wright Square. Or riding the river road in the dark and staring across the water at Sangaree."

"You know too much, Gabe."

"Answer this—why have you yet to visit Sangaree?"

Toby weighed his answer, even as he raged inwardly at the journalist's uncanny instinct. "Would you call me fanciful if I said that Sangaree sums up everything we fought against in the war? Or that I'd feel I was—surrendering to her if I so much as set foot on her lawn?"

"Nancy surrendered a bit on her side when she came to work at the offices. She may be ready to surrender all the way. How can you know, until you've paid her a visit?"

"Don't think I'm afraid of her."

"I'd say it was yourself you fear." The journalist's eyes crinkled with sly laughter. "I'd even say you were in love with her, if I dared. Head over heels in love, and too stubborn to admit it above a whisper." He lifted a detaining palm as Toby began to speak. "Never mind denying it. You must still visit Sangaree within the week—*if only to check the rice seeding.*"

"True enough. But I can go out by sloop and inspect the paddies from the waterside."

"Integrity's an admirable virtue. It can be a lonely bedfellow."

But it was Toby's turn to grin now. "Perhaps I'm aware of that At least I'm attending the cotillion tomorrow."

"At the Filature?"

"At the Filature And, since my colleague Dr Darby will be late at the clinic, I've written to his wife, asking for the privilege of escorting her." Toby all but laughed aloud as Gabriel's eyes popped. "What's more, I'll ask Nancy Gregory for a dance, if it'll ease your mind"

"That I shall watch with bated breath——" Gabriel broke the sentence short as the door burst wide and Harvey Bristol half-strode, half-reeled into the taproom.

A year's absence had changed the oversized dandy but little, if anything, his arrogance had expanded in that interval, along with the pouter-pigeon distension of his chest Toby studied him coldly over Gabriel's shoulder. Here, at last, was something he could smash with relish, if Nancy's ex-suitor chose to come near enough

It was common knowledge in Savannah that the younger Bristol, taking that broken engagement in stride, had merely decamped to London on his father's bounty, to hunt down another heiress—in this case, a woman some years his senior, whose dowry was hers to dispose. With that fact established, Harvey Bristol had vanished into a strange obscurity. Some said that he had lived out the year like a prince in London, and, when his elderly bride had had the grace to die after a few months of wedded bliss, in a seraglio in Paris

Others insisted that the woman was very much alive, and that Harvey had simply brought her and her moneybags to a palace in Havana There was even a rumor afloat that Harvey had become a British subject and purchased an out-island in the Bahamas as his special kingdom

Tonight there was no mistaking his assurance, as he stood with arms akimbo in the midst of the suddenly quiet taproom, swaying a little, even now, as befitted a nabob who could wash down his dinner with three bottles of claret and still walk to his horse unaided Even the dullest toper could sense the impact of that entrance, the all-but-oriental splendor of the satin boat cloak that muffled Harvey's magnificent torso from square shoulders to tapered midriff Harvey's scowl, under a flat-brimmed sailor's hat, was for Toby alone. Every man in the room sensed the fact instantly There was even a kind of falling back from tables to bar as the newcomer advanced, making the room his own with each ominous stride

"Will you fight, Kent?"

"Distance, sir!"

It was Gabriel who had spoken, slapping the room to silence with a whiplash bellow. It was Gabriel's steel that flickered into view as he lifted his walking stick in one fist, baring nine inches of gleaming blade from a spring pocket in its tip. Toby swept the protection aside as he got to his feet. A man in a trance, who recognizes the inevitability of the moment and rather enjoys it, he faced Harvey Bristol across the table.

"Sorry, Gabe. He's all mine."

The sword cane had stopped Harvey in his tracks. Watching him narrowly, Toby could read no fear in his face, only the bulldog frown of the dandy who has made up his mind to kill, and proceeds by rote thereafter.

"Who'll speak for you, Bristol? D'you have a second?"

"Damn your impudence, fellow. I'm asking you to *fight* —not to duel."

Toby smiled thinly. This, too, was part of the ritual. Unworthy of a gentleman's lead, he could still be punished by a gentleman's fists. Like all young men of his class, Harvey Bristol had been a trained boxer since boyhood. Standing a head taller than Toby, relying on his bull-like strength, he had chosen his method of humiliation deliberately—and with every prospect of success. This, reflected Toby, was a fitting climax to Thorne and Bazelton—as logical as it was brutal.

"Why must we fight, Bristol?"

"You know why. Will you put up your fists, or crawl?"

"Did your father send you? Or is it your own idea to play the bully?"

In the back of the room someone guffawed at the boldness of the question. The laugh cheered Toby, telling him that he had one friend in the brawl to come. Even without Gabriel's sword cane the fight might be more evenly matched than he dared to hope.

That same cane had restrained Harvey Bristol a second time as he lunged forward with both fists cocked. Using the point as a lever, Gabriel flicked aside the black-satin cloak, revealing the fact that young Bristol was stripped to the waist and carried no visible weapons.

"Take him, Toby, if you still want him. It'd give me pleasure to trim him to size, but——"

"I'm hoping he'll answer my question first."

Young Bristol's eyes slitted ominously. "I need give no reason for thrashing you. Savannah knows why the beating's been postponed, and why you deserve it."

"Tell us anyhow," said Gabriel. "Any thought of yours will bear repeating."

"This fellow's played ducks with one of the finest properties in Georgia."

"Dr Kent has fed more mouths, and cured more sick, than you could count with your stableboy arithmetic "

A rumble of approval greeted this statement—so deep a rumble that Harvey Bristol, glancing from face to face in the taproom, seemed at a loss for words Clearly he had meant this sortie to explode into fisticuffs, with no time wasted

"One thing I'll grant you," said Gabriel "Dr Kent slapped *your* hand aside before you could line your pockets Thanks to him, you were forced to cross an ocean to find a woman rich enough to satisfy your greed—and foolish enough to marry you "

"I'll fight you later, Thatch, make no mistake of that."

"In ten more minutes," said Gabriel, "you'll be in no mood to fight anyone Of course if you're thinking of pistols tomorrow I'll be happy to oblige you Which of those bleary eyes would you like a bullet through? Any of your friends will explain that I can puncture you at will at twenty paces. So, for that matter, can my friend Dr. Kent "

"I've had enough of your bombast, Thatch——"

"*I've* had enough of your heroics. It's quite clever of you to challenge Dr Kent with fists, not with pistols At least you'll be alive this time tomorrow. But you weren't quite clever enough, Bristol If you'd made a few inquiries upriver, you'd have learned that Dr Kent was boxing *and* wrestling champion of Augusta when he was only eighteen, and has yet to lose a match You'd have learned that he's kept in trim, even in Savannah, with myself as his capable instructor. But enough of words As you see, Dr. Kent is ready to demonstrate just how capable I am."

Gabriel skipped aside on that as Toby charged out from the inglenook—stripped to the waist like Harvey, with both fists flailing The younger Bristol met the rush head on, with a howl of triumph as his own fist drew first honors, a murderous hook to the jaw that sent Toby sprawling The sawdust floor of the taproom seemed to explode as Bristol crashed his full weight upon the prostrate Toby before the latter could roll aside. Clawing for purchase in the smaller man's face and body, Bristol, for the moment, seemed to have won his fight before it was fairly joined

Toby, with roman candles bursting in his brain, felt the crushing weight but dimly And then his senses spun back to normal just as his enemy's fingers laced in his hair and his enemy's two thumbs, describing a deadly parabola from crown to forehead, descended to the level of his eye sockets He had not believed Bristol would descend to gouging Yet the

fight had become a barroom brawl in a matter of seconds, with no holds barred, no possible maiming ruled out

A nail flicked his eyelids just before the hands arched away for better purchase. He had treated too many gougings to underrate the purpose of those two questing thumbs Once they had locked at the juncture of nose and eye socket, once they had dug deep into the defenseless corneas, he was blinded, both eyes reduced to red, pendulous smears that no surgery could save.

Fortunately he had been as near blindness more than once in upriver battles Now that he knew his assailant, he remembered a dodge that had saved him before As Bristol's hands locked for the kill, Toby shifted slightly under the other man's smothering weight A foot, twisting expertly to lock at Bristol's instep, opened the big man's legs as neatly as a scissor handle; a suddenly freed knee, cannoned upward with all of Toby's strength, caught Bristol full in the groin, precisely where it would hurt most

Bristol's bellow made the tankards dance behind the bar, Bristol's spasm of pain, relaxing his hold for the split second that Toby needed, saved both eyes and fight Another hammer blow of kneecap to groin, and Bristol was jackknifed on the floor, writhing, another quick twist, with all his muscle behind it, and Toby was free of that smothering weight—free to stagger to his feet and punish the bigger man's head with two well-aimed bootheels

Reeling to the bar to catch his breath, he did not press his advantage The circle of faces, swaying drunkenly on the outskirts of his vision, cleared slowly. He picked out men he knew among the drovers, at least two sailors from Darby ships anchored in mid-river—and, strangest of all, the countenance of Leary, his own head clerk. Leary was staring as though he could not believe his eyes So, for that matter, was old Crowther—his tongue stilled for once as he swayed with the circle, intent as any man in the taproom

The door burst wide again, and the room was heavy with the thud of boots Toby counted heads above the sudden melee, and knew that these were Bristol tenants, awaiting their signal to join the fracas He smiled through bloody lips Harvey, for all his flourish, had not been foolish enough to fight alone Fists had already begun to fly joyously all over the taproom, and men declared their loyalties by the oldest of symbols He saw Gabriel whoop into action, saw the walking stick, its steel sheathed now, turned into a club in a twinkling, to punish the bullet head of a Bristol overseer Then Bristol himself was upon him again with teeth and nails, and he, too, forgot details in the pure animal joy of combat

For all his fury Bristol was already weaving on his feet A smash above the heart anchored him neatly, with his back to the bar Another blow to the head—a left and a right hook to both of the full-fleshed jowls—a fist from sawdust to mouth, smearing the pink, well-fed face with its own blood. Toby had cut down bigger men—and hated himself for the slaughter Tonight he reveled shamelessly in the blows as they sank home one by one.

Another punch, from sawdust to face—a right and a left to the solar plexus, sunk knuckle-deep in the suet of the big man's belly Then, regretfully, the *coup de grâce,* a final uppercut with all his bone and sinew behind it, flush to the jaw Bristol gasped, like a pricked balloon, even as his knees buckled, he sagged rather than fell, his eyes still fixed on Toby in a kind of glazed surprise, his great welted muscles inert as jelly

The disposal of Harvey Bristol had occupied no more than two minutes Turning back to the general combat, Toby saw that the battle of the taproom, as it would be known henceforth in Savannah's annals, had been all but won for the Darby Company There was still time to knock a brace of tenants' heads together as they weaved drunkenly from the punishment of Gabriel's knobbed cane, and to stand back with composure as Colonel Crowther, an uneasy neutral throughout, was pitched into limbo, along with the last of the Bristol forces An explosion of oaths in the darkness and the thud of retreating footsteps told the story adequately: the Bristol henchmen, bowled over by an unexpected show of might, had left their ringleader to his fate

"Stop me if I'm wrong," said Gabriel. "But have you enjoyed yourself more since you came to Savannah?"

The journalist's breathing was all but normal now, save for a ripped shoulder and a slightly purpled eye, he bore no visible marks of combat. No one spoke as he walked over to the bar to stare down at the ruin of Harvey Bristol

"This morning, on the Darby dock," said Gabriel, "I counted thirty-six barrels of tar, fresh from upriver stills "

"There's a hundred and nine more in the depot, sir," said Leary

"Could you spare one of those barrels for a very special purpose?"

The suggestion was the only spark the crowd needed. Other voices took up the threat in hoarse symphony.

"Tar and feathers—that's the ticket!"

"Ride him down Bull Street on a rail "

"Don't let him off light, Doc "

"Breakin' in here like he owned the earth "

"Sayin' he'd fight fair, then tryin' a gouge."

"Burn the Tory bastard!"

"That's right! Tar him first—*then* burn him!"

Toby roared for silence. "Sorry, gentlemen, but he's still all mine."

A dozen hands tried hard to restrain him, but Gabriel and the dock workers held them back Leary himself opened the taproom door as Toby swung his fallen enemy on one shoulder and groped his way into the night The horse trough, gleaming faintly under the stars, was a tempting depository, he ignored it in favor of Bristol's own mount, still pawing at the hitching post across the way.

The crowd streamed out in his wake Pine knots burst into flame at the edges of the impromptu procession that formed about him Tossed on his own saddlebow, Harvey Bristol collapsed like a meal sack—stirred just once to vomit copiously into the sandy street—then lay still as someone slapped the horse's flank. Heads showed by magic in windows along the way. Toby was conscious of voices babbling beyond the fringes of the crowd, and knew that his admiring escort was growing larger with each step.

The Bristol's town house, a square Georgian pile set deep in a garden of cabbage palms, stood on a dead-end street adjoining Wright Square, known informally to its neighbors as Bristol Mews Those same neighbors were out in force tonight as the torches burst through the green-fronded palm boles He saw the light flash on more than one musket barrel, heard the familiar crowd rumble swell about him—a deep-throated rumble, the sign of a happy beast that is about to have its way at last He let himself ride on the crest of that rumble It was too late to restrain it now

But there were no shots after all as he led the horse and its grotesque burden to the Bristol carriage block No one stirred in that wild mingling of friend and enemy as he braced his feet on the Bristol driveway and swung the inert Harvey to his shoulder again. He faced them, mounting the carriage block to let his eyes sweep above the tide of bobbing heads, hearing the last rumble die as he held up a free hand for silence.

"Quiet—all of you! You've come far enough."

"What about yourself, Doctor?"

He grinned down at Gabriel's question "I'm delivering him to his own doctor" Again he held up his hand to still the guffaws "And I'm calling it a night I'd advise you to do the same, all of you"

Looking back on the moment he knew that he could have written a far different finale on that evening with a single

burning word Remembering another night across Wright Square, a busy year in the past, he knew it would have been no less than rough justice to stand aside and let those flaring pine knots do their work. Yet there were enemies in the crowd, many of them armed He had no way to judge their numbers, or their temper. Even as reason clamored with a thirst for revenge, he was glad that reason could triumph.

The crowd surged forward to a man—but he stepped up to the Bristol portico and shouted it back. Gabriel was already beside him, with a brace of pistols produced from nowhere, so was old Leary Where had that bookkeeper found the squirrel gun he brandished so expertly? So were the Darby dock foreman and a half-dozen aides, each with a cudgel in his fist Boxing him neatly, this guard of honor held the crowd in check as he crossed the portico and kicked open the massive door.

The portal swung wide under his boot. He was not surprised to find the candlelighted hallway staring empty save for a trembling butler Leary's musket pinned the majordomo to the door panel Gabriel, with both pistols cocked, dogged Toby's heels from door frame to foyer, from foyer to the high dim arch that gave to the formal parlors.

He had visited this house more than once for doctors' meetings His voice and old Bristol's had echoed through this same archway before, as they fought to sway the collective medical mind of Savannah Thanks to that foreknowledge, he knew that the older doctor's study lay just beyond the sliding panels at the far end of the main salon And he knew, just as surely, that it would take no shouting to bring Bristol from his lair tonight

Even in his towering rage he could not help smiling at what he saw Matthew Bristol, in a flowered silk dressing sack, his formal wig at his side, was deep in work at a secretaire, with an apprentice beside him Candle sconces haloed him convincingly as he chewed his pen, the stare that he lifted above his heavy spectacles was innocence itself

So you're playing tonight's game to the end, thought Toby. You're hoping, even now, to be surprised by the news that I'm lying, blinded, in Tondee's sawdust. Obviously you're ready with convincing proof that your son acted on his own impulse in that brawl. Perhaps you'd even find yourself persuaded to treat my wounds, if none of your fellow jackals would touch me He brushed aside that pious picture as he brushed past old Bristol's silken skirts, to toss Harvey on a sofa against the far wall

"Don't stare so, Doctor. As you can see, your son's been

puked and bled. Standard remedies for choler in your manual——"

"What have you done to him?" Old Bristol seemed to wrench the words from his throat and drop to his knees beside the sofa in the same instant. Watching the gnarled, liver-spotted hands search Harvey's chest for broken ribs, Toby waited for the discovery to register.

"If you've killed him, Kent, I'll——"

"If I'd killed him, I've a dozen witnesses to swear I killed in self-defense. Can you say as much, when you sent two hired thugs to murder me in a duel?"

"You'll go to law for this."

"I'll welcome a chance to bring you and your latest thug into court. Don't be a fool forever, Bristol. Can't you understand I'm in Savannah to stay?"

He strode from study to salon on that, ignoring Bristol's sputter—and freezing in his tracks as he heard a pistol cocked behind him. Gabriel, still facing into the study alcove, fired instantly, without appearing to take aim. Toby turned in time to see the apprentice spin behind the desk and fall into his chair again to suck a splintered wrist.

"Another obvious point," said Gabriel. "Don't arm your janizaries until you've taught them to shoot—and unless you want a fight to the death. Last and best point: don't fight us at all, if you want to stay in Savannah. We outnumber you, Matthew, here and everywhere. Keep your place, or we won't keep ours."

He slapped Toby's shoulder, a debonair actor who knows how to exit on cue. They walked through the hall together, staring the quaking butler from their path. On the portico, the rough guard of honor boxed Toby instantly. He walked through the crowd with his chin high, shaking what hands he could reach. Even by torchlight he could read alliance in a hundred pairs of eyes, an acceptance that went beyond words or handclasps.

Gabriel's right to a point, thought Toby dazedly. I've hardly misjudged my enemies—or what they'd do to destroy me. But I've been a fool not to count my friends before. A double-distilled fool not to force myself across an invisible line, to see if Nancy Gregory will meet me halfway.

v

Lara nickered as her stall door opened. Wise in her master's ways, the roan hunter knew what was coming, even before Toby could toss a saddlecloth across her back. Long, moonlit canters down the river road were a commonplace in

Lara's scheme of things But he spoke their destination aloud, if only to assure himself that he was not quite mad.

"We're going out to Sangaree again, my girl And this time we'll go all the way."

The stables of the Darby town house opened to an alley behind the gardens Toby had slipped away as the crowd dispersed on the square, picking his way by instinct down that tunnel of oleanders. Moses, the stableboy who watched over the Darby mounts by night, had quieted at a word Like Lara, the slave was versed in the habits of the Darby Company's president Moses knew only too well that Dr Kent preferred to saddle the hunter with his own hands and ride out alone.

Yes, he would ride all the way to Sangaree tonight. Would he also find the courage to tell Nancy Gregory that he loved her?

If he accomplished that miracle, he would let her interpret the news as she liked Loving her, he would even trust her judgment where the future of the company was concerned If she and Pagnol . . . But he thrust the Frenchman from his mind as he led Lara into the stable yard, skirting the flagstones warily lest the hunter's hoofs disturb the sleeping house behind them. If Nancy and Pagnol were lovers, he would simply call the Frenchman out and trust to his marksmanship. A doctor in love had every right to forget he was a doctor.

Or so he reasoned at this moment, knowing that a higher ethic would make its voice heard tomorrow. Knowing, too, that the wild ride before him was the only medicine to still the tumult in his heart.

He had used the same medicine often, when he faced a sleepless night, or a desire that had burst its barriers Then he needed to hear the thud of Lara's hoofs mile on mile down the river road To see the white silhouette of Sangaree across the tidal reach To taste the knowledge that far more than a tidal river and a proud white portico lay between him and Nancy Gregory. Only these realities could send him back to his bed, to the desk above the Savannah, to the compulsion of his working days

Tonight he would spur into that tidal reach and gallop across her lawn, he would thunder on her portico until she admitted him. Or would that resolve fade when he reined in at the river's bank and stared at the image of his desire?

He swung into the saddle before the doubt could take shape, and shivered, at last, as the March midnight stung his flesh. For the first time he was conscious of the fact that he was still stripped for battle. He smiled, ignoring the throb of his pulses for a moment Even a mudsill Romeo could

hardly state his case in doeskins and Hessian boots, with an enemy's blood still lacing his naked torso.

He tethered Lara at the kitchen porch and entered the house by the buttery door Following a well-known path from preserve closet to kitchen proper, where a chunk of fire glowed dully on the hearth, he crossed the room by feel rather than sight, remembered the creaking board on the servants' stair, and gained the bedroom hall in a dozen long-legged bounds Here, again, he could find his own door by touch and ignore the auxiliary candle burning in its hurricane cone at the stairhead

Here, as always, a jug of hot water, simmering above the banked coals of his fireplace against his late return from the clinic, was ready to his hand He washed methodically and discarded his battle-stained clothes for fresh doeskins, a broadcloth uniform coat whose buttons still glowed like minor moons, thanks to Jubal's care, a cocked hat that had seen service from Saratoga to Vermont Somehow, it was appropriate that he invade the domain of Nancy Darby Gregory in uniform

The light tapping at his door did not startle him; it was a risk he had taken deliberately Martha had often ambushed him thus, when he dared return to the house ahead of Roy He growled a muted "Come!" knowing in advance that she would be in a loose white peignoir with her hair unbound, and knowing, even before she took her first step into the starlit window frame, that there was nothing beneath that peignoir but Martha.

"I thought I heard you come up, Toby."

"Don't tell me you're *still* a light sleeper?"

Try as he might, he could not keep the irony from his voice—or the implied admission that he had hoped to find her absent tonight, with one of her gallants Martha's talent for acquiring, satisfying, and gracefully banishing, lovers was notorious in Savannah Toby had surmised, long ago, that Roy, brooding happily in his dispensary, was perhaps the only mature male in Georgia unaware of her accessibility. She was accessible tonight, he saw that instantly—an ardent instrument ready to drop that deceptively modest wrapper in a twinkling and throb in any key he desired

"You hoped I'd be out, didn't you?"

"Frankly, yes "

"That wasn't too gallant, Toby "

"May I be even less gallant, and imply I'm in a hurry——"

"An assignation—at this hour?"

"Why not?"

"With the usual lady of your dreams? The lady who'll never have you?"

"I've made no attempt to expose your peccadilloes, Martha Why speculate on mine?"

"It isn't speculation, my dear." Her voice had softened magically, to save him, he could not be sure if the tremolo note was genuine. "I saw you bring Lara to the door just now. I know just where you'll ride tonight"

"How can you know?"

"We've been friends too long, Toby Kent I can read you like a book" She took a step forward, her long lashes fluttering, her downcast eyes demure as any maiden's. "You *are* riding to Sangaree, aren't you——"

"Since you insist."

"To moon across the river at her, like a lovesick boy?"

"I'm paying Mrs Gregory a call"

"One doesn't call on ladies at this hour."

"Never mind the hour We've a discussion that's long overdue If you must hear all, I doubt if she'll be surprised to see me"

"You know that Pagnol is at Sangaree tonight?"

"Damn Pagnol!"

"Damn him all you like, but he's Nancy Gregory's lover."

"That I'll not believe"

"They sailed down river to the plantation house just before dusk They'll sail back tomorrow"

Remembering what he had seen at his office window, he felt his cheeks crimson "You've no right to say such things of your sister-in-law. Not until you can prove them She doesn't stoop to gossip about you. Not in my hearing, at least."

"What has she discussed in your hearing, save cargo manifests and the price of tobacco?"

He turned toward the door and cursed under his breath as she blocked his path. "If you'll forgive me, Martha—it's a long ride to the ford"

Martha did not budge, and her hand was soft as ever on his arm. "Perhaps I should let you see for yourself, after all You know that Pagnol has furnished the money to rebuild Sangaree?"

"What of it?" The fact that most of the great plantation house had been restored in the past year, thanks to the Frenchman's bounty, was common news in Savannah Nancy Gregory, walking with her separate pride, had taken the whispers without turning a hair.

"Don't you remember what I said your first night in this

house? He's an outright pirate—or, what's worse, the brains behind the raids."

"Think what you're saying!"

"I'm telling you that Nancy is helping him, in return for the money to rebuild Sangaree That she's given him the sailing time of each ship the Darby Company's lost."

"You can't prove a word of this."

"*You* could, if you dared."

"That's more than enough, Martha"

"Why are you such a fool, Toby? I'm your friend Why won't you listen?"

Because this is hate for Nancy Gregory speaking, not you."

"Aren't we united in that hate?"

"Perhaps I've been unjust to her."

Martha gave a throaty gasp of triumph "I might have known she'd bewitch you in time. Tell me how she managed? By inviting you to the cotillion tomorrow?"

"I think we've discussed this enough."

But she stopped him yet again, with a hand on either shoulder, her body swaying close as she continued to plead For an instant he stood irresolute, bemused by her nearness

"She'll only mock you, Toby I could love you as you've never been loved Won't you let me prove myself?"

He broke free in earnest then, and stood with his back to her, facing the dying flame on the hearth as he fought for a measure of control Her hunger for his flesh, and, even in this moment of panic, he knew that the purple phrase summed up Martha Darby completely, had never exploded into such abandon

"I want to belong to you, Toby. I want to help you in every way——"

He turned to face that soft moan, forcing a calm he did not feel "Do your marriage vows mean nothing, then?"

"Less than nothing. Roy's a good man I know I've done badly by Roy. But if I could tell you how *dull——*" She collected herself with an effort There was real pathos in her tone when she spoke again. "Never mind, Toby You think I'm a bad woman I'm not, really. I'm just—unfulfilled Only another woman could understand how unsatisfying a man like Roy can be"

"At least don't pretend you're unfulfilled," he said

But Martha took the brutal reference in her stride "Other women have taken lovers while they wait for the lover they really want" Again her fluent body swayed, touching and teasing him from breast to ankle "If I say that those popinjays were less than nothing you won't believe me Perhaps you won't even care. But it's true"

"Good night, Martha."

"We belonged to each other so naturally once, Toby. Why can't we be natural any more?"

"Good night, Martha!"

"Remember the old sachem in the cave? How he'd smile in the firelight when you'd take me in your arms? When I'd beg you to never stop loving—and you'd promise you never would—and *almost* make good that promise? I want that kind of love again, Toby Kent. I want to be beaten and conquered and lifted into another world"

She was clinging to him now with hands and lips, clinging as though she could never let him go. He felt his own flesh tense with the effort at self-control, felt the great, primal tides of his being throb in counterpoint to Martha's own wildly throbbing heart It had been more than a year since he had held a woman in his arms A year and a day, to be exact—when Nancy had played her own serving maid on the flatboat The memory saved him in time, exploding like white light inside his brain He broke free in earnest, snatching at his battered army tricorn as a man might pluck at a straw in a cyclone

"You'll be sorry for this tomorrow, Martha."

"You're the one who'll sorrow, my dear. Never you mind. You'll be back"

"Not while I have my reason."

"Don't forget you're escorting me to the cotillion while my lawful husband labors at the hospital. Or would fear make you that ungallant?"

"Fear is hardly the word," he said. "Or is honor too big a word for your dictionary?"

"Prove you aren't afraid, then. Kiss me good night before you go to Sangaree"

Her arms were about him as she spoke. With no sense of volition, he found that their mouths had met, clung, mingled. Memory of a shared ecstasy burned his senses, lashing dormant instincts free His hands caressed her wisely His lips, moving from mouth to throat to breast, remembered old delights . . . But it was Martha who broke free this time—Martha who crossed slowly to the glowing coals at the hearth. He read her smile, and guessed that it was the outer badge of triumph—woman's oldest triumph, when she has marked her prey, and knows she may return to it at will

"Go to Sangaree, Toby I know you'll be back"

"I'll be back," he said "More's the pity for us both"

"You don't mean a word of that, of course"

"You'll see, Martha," he said, still fighting for his lost control.

"We were in Sachem Cave just now. We can go back when we like."

"We can never go back, really."

He knew her next move by rote, even before her fingers closed on the drawstrings of her robe He watched the rough white cloth part from throat to waist, from waist to slender ankles One deft toss, and it had vanished into darkness like a homeless bird Martha stepped softly forward, letting the glow of the fire high-light her naked perfection He saw she had spoken truly. every inch of that vibrant flesh was the girl of Sachem Cave, the girl who had once been part of his bloodstream

"Does this prove I'm right, Toby?"

"The devil made you well," he said.

She was gone before he could speak, again snatching her wrapper as she fled, though she paused in the hall to laugh back at him Her whisper lingered, summing up her wisdom in that last casual phrase He found that he had charged after her—cursed blindly as he stumbled against the stair railing, found his sense of reality again as he fumbled from hallway to kitchen to open air Lara lifted her head impatiently, then nickered from pure equine joy as her master pitched to his saddle at long last

It was a long ride, but Toby remembered little of it.

Confused pictures stood out here and there—gaunt pines against the stars, the hoot of an owl in a jungle hammock at the water's edge, the metallic whisper of cabbage palms in another wild sweep of bottomland Faint murmurs of nature, intruding on the fringe of his perception for a moment, before they were driven aside by the cacophony of Lara's hoofs and his own deep-throated cursing

Much later he remembered that he had taken his usual road—the wagon track that snaked out of Savannah to the eastward, skirting the tangled growth of what was once the Trustees' Garden to merge with the river road somewhere between the town line and Sangaree Ford. Later still, he admitted that only luck had saved him from a broken neck that night, when, after hours of hell-for-leather galloping—though it seemed that he had scarcely quitted the alley behind Wright Square—he reined in at last, and stared at his destination across the smooth-flowing river

In the quiet starlight just before the dawn Sangaree was remote as a white temple, serene as a monument to a vanished time He had studied the great manor house too carefully in the past to need landmarks now Even in that satin dark he could place the soaring portico, the boxwoods of the formal gardens, the oak tree that had been green and dripping

with gray beards of moss when Columbus had been only a harmless madman.

There, clustered about the landing, were the work buildings of the plantation, the forge and warehouse and threshing floors; there, on the flats beyond, were the neat rows of slave cabins, gleaming with fresh whitewash; there, fanning away on all sides, were the rice paddies, faint green in the deep darkness, whispering with the first thrust of the incoming tide . . . He stared at it all, as a man might con the ramparts of a heaven he will never reach. Then, with a murmured word for Lara, he swung down from the saddle and led his lathered mount to water.

Giving the hunter her bridle, he sat down, as he had always settled, in the ambush of the largest water oak on his side of the Savannah and let his high resolve seep away.

Lara, drinking quietly in the shallows, would return at a nod. In a moment he could be on the road again, returning home at a slow trot—to the mountain of work that awaited him. For the present it was enough to stare at the white silhouette and let quietness invade his spirit, along with a yearning that would never find words . . . Martha, and the hot compulsion of Martha's flesh, was less than nothing now. There would be time enough to solve that threat at the Filature tomorrow.

From where he sat he could not quite trace the main stream bed of the Savannah; the branch that separated Sangaree Island from the mainland, actually no more than a tidal creek, was perhaps a hundred yards wide at this point. Fordable when the tide was out, this creek was still deep enough in mid-channel to float the plantation barges and such small coastwise craft that served the buildings clustered about the landing. He counted the scows at anchor in midstream—lumber barges, for the most part, though he recognized a stonemason's scow among the others and caught the wink of glass on a glazier's barge moored snugly at the dock itself.

So the foundations were in for the south wing. Tomorrow, or the day after, the glass would be restored to the eastern belvedere, the last scar that remained from the Revolution. Strange how well he knew Sangaree, though he had yet to set foot on portico or grounds. Stranger still, how easily he could accept its magnificence tonight.

Like Nancy and the poise that was stronger than armor between them those proud walls were built for eternity. A bastion of wealth in the New World, they would continue to dominate all they surveyed. The Darby Company and its fumble at abundance for all could succeed or fail. Sangaree

would still rise inviolate across its quiet river, a thing of beauty no revolution could change

A thing of beauty, like its mistress. . . . He could send Lara charging into the shallows now, he could thunder across that lawn, beginning to glow like a vast emerald in the dawn, and smash into her bedroom with river mud still wet on his boots He could take her before she wakened—and she would remain inviolate

He faced that discovery for a long sobering moment, letting the last pulse of desire beat in his throat. Possession of the flesh, that sly, eternal hunger, was not enough. With Martha, it could be the justification of the life force, the pole about which her whole life revolved, he could join his flesh and Martha's as casually as Gabriel tumbled a doxy in Muskrat Town. . With Nancy, that same physical union was only the beginning, with Nancy, he must *offer* himself—all of himself—before he thought of possession.

With Nancy, he must wait until she made her own offer, on her own terms Wait, in short, until she stepped over the boundary that separated them so fatally—and completely. He could blame no one but fate if the tidal reach of Sangaree —so cruelly wide there in the growing day—separated them forever

But he did not stir, even though reason had returned to claim him as an unwilling apostle again. A man can be pardoned for staring awhile longer at his heart's desire, even as he admits it is beyond his reach

The light moved like a living thing now among the palms and live oaks on Sangaree Island The dawn, gay as a dancing girl, sprang from dove-gray water to the gilded weather vane atop the threshing house, from the slates of the western belvedere to the great pointed mansard of the house itself He looked back at Sangaree with wide-open eyes, cherishing each detail of Nancy's domain The ancient well house deep in ivy; the scrolled acanthus leaves above an ivory-white doorway, the wide, urn-bordered steps that led down so serenely to the gardens that faced the open Savannah

Curiously enough it had all seemed much more real by starlight He puzzled on that a moment more, wondering why his vision should shrink a little in the first light of day Quite as though he were studying the abode of Nancy Gregory through the wrong end of a spyglass—forcing a remoteness his heart would not admit, even as his mind insisted it was inevitable

The catboat had been tacking into the tide for some time in the shadow of the far bank Now quartering into the lazy current, it danced into full view, its triangle of sail catching

the first glint of sun at its peak Bathed in the radiance of the new day, the little vessel seemed to float on air rather than sail, a ship in a mirage, suspended in pearl-gray light between sea and sky Then the mirage lifted, and it was day —full, staring day that framed the catboat beyond all dispute as Nancy Gregory's.

He stared at it for a long time, unwilling to admit, even now, that his eyesight and his premonition were accurate.

Lara came up from the water at his whistle He led the mare deep into the shadows of the oaks, tethered her there as securely as he could, and returned to the river on hands and knees Screening himself in a tangle of bay grape, he saw at once that the catboat was still too distant to have noted his presence here on the bank And though there was no mistaking the vessel's rig, he could not yet be sure if the figure at the tiller were man or woman.

Later, he knew that he had waited scarcely a quarter-hour in that ambush, though it seemed a bitter eternity A dozen times he was close to flight, anything, he told himself, was better than solving the mystery of that vessel and its helmsman.

Throughout, his better self struggled to rise, to lift him to Lara's saddle and return to Savannah Yet even as he struggled he knew that he would wait until the catboat swung into its next lazy tack Eventually, thanks to the shape of Sangaree Creek, the helmsman must set his course for this shore The channel had scoured deep less than fifty feet from the bank. When the boom swung again, that helmsman would be a perfect target—if it was Felix Pagnol

Martha had said that Pagnol was Nancy's lover, he had put that down to sheer female spite, even as he recalled the note he had found on Nancy's desk, the damning glimpse of them both, in this same catboat, from his office window, the even more damning fact that Pagnol's wealth had restored Sangaree, to the last whitewashed brick in the slave quarters Now, as he watched the sail dip with the breeze, he could pray with all his soul that Pagnol was not aboard His heart, of course, was another matter. Trobbing with the weary, green fever of jealousy, it had already teased his brain into a madness of its own

Perhaps he would surprise the guilty pair, side by side in that cockpit, returning to Savannah after a white night of love. Nancy sailed often to the Darby dock, preferring the run from the mouth of her own creek to the ride along the river. The boom swung there in mid-channel, he strained his eyes, but it was too far for details He knew only that the helmsman was nursing the breeze expertly and sailing a well-learned course

Had she returned to Savannah in other dawns, with the Frenchman beside her? Toby's truant mind sketched the picture vividly. The cockpit would be deep in cushions. Pagnol, elegant as a satin butterfly, would choose this precise moment to lock the tiller before he drew Nancy down into his arms.

Remembering the one ambiguous kiss she had granted him, he could picture that other kiss all too clearly, and how the Frenchman's love-making would move on triumphantly, far beyond kisses

Reason banished the picture, not too firmly. Only a fevered fool would linger here, like a beast in ambush And, even as he repeated that conviction, he found that he had crouched deeper in his leafy cave and lifted the pistol from his belt A glance told him that the priming was bone-dry, the flintlock balanced precisely against its metal burr This was no dandy's derringer—this was an English weapon, made of finest Sheffield steel, hair-triggered and deadly He had never used it against an enemy, though he had taken it from the belt of one of His Brittanic Majesty's dead officers, as a prize of war It had served to cheat the boredom of those years in the field Darby's Rangers were seldom short of powder and ball, and it had amused their senior surgeon to outshoot their best marksmen at pistol practice

That English pistol would serve another purpose today if Felix Pagnol dared to show his head above the gunwale of that fast-approaching catboat.

The vessel was scarcely two hundred yards distant now. Sailing sweetly in the following wind, she seemed to handle without human aid Was his vision a reality, after all? Had Nancy and the Frenchman lashed the tiller, to enjoy a last amorous dalliance there in the cockpit? He rose to hands and knees, then to his full height There was a metallic click as his tensed fingers cocked the pistol, with no conscious order from his brain And then the rising sun splintered his eyeballs with its radiance. His head cleared magically, and he knew, even before the drumbeat of his heart eased, that he could never raise that pistol arm to murder Felix Pagnol.

The gun dropped into the deep grass without a sound He stepped into full view, there on the riverbank, as the catboat's boom tackle creaked Running smartly with brown river water creaming at her cutwater, the little vessel skimmed inshore with the fresh morning breeze behind her, until she was hardly a stone's toss from the bank The helmsman, still concealed by the mainsail, hugged deep water to the danger point and beyond. Then the tiller went up, the boom swung in earnest,

pivoting the bowsprit until it seemed to rake the spongy bank at Toby's feet.

The wind slapped the mainsail. He saw Nancy at last, stretched at full length along her gunwale, with the tiller secure between her knees, her gipsy bandanna gay in the whippy morning

If she was startled as their eyes met, she concealed her surprise admirably. There was even a smile on her lips as she raised a hand in greeting Tilted like a saucy chip on the Savannah, the catboat was now exposed to his inspection from stem to stern. The cockpit was empty save for a portmanteau.

A sob of relief rose in his throat He checked it in time and raised his hand to return Nancy's wave.

"Aren't you out early, Doctor?"

"No earlier than you, Mrs. Gregory."

"Take care I don't beat you to the depot. That would never do."

"Lara can outdistance that catboat."

"Shall we put her to the test?"

"By all means" Even in his vertigo of deliverance he could marvel at the steadiness of his voice. She must never guess that he had been spying on her—and on Sangaree—since dawn.

"Why are you on the river road at this hour, Doctor? Or mayn't one ask?"

"I've been out all night, on a country call."

"Stop at Sangaree next time and water your horse If I'd known I could have sailed you back with me "

"Is it safe for me to—stop at Sangaree?" he had raised his voice a bit, now that the catboat had turned on her heel to follow the inshore channel.

"How will you know, until you've tried?"

Toby stood alone on the bank until the sail was only a white dot in the great tan immensity of the Savannah Then he swung into his saddle again, and gave Lara her head on the river road Today, at least, Nancy Gregory was welcome to the Darby depot and all its riches.

Perhaps, if he rode through the barrens till dusk, he could collect his whirling thoughts—and scheme out some way to face her when they met to music at the Filature.

FOUR • THE FILATURE

TOBY stared at the mincing dandy in his mirror. The dandy stared back, duplicating his scowl even as he duplicated the silken legs, the tight waistcoat, the foam of French lace at the breast of the black satin clawhammer.

He had taken his time about dressing for the Filature ball, postponing—until the last decent moment—his descent to the living-room floor and to Martha The calm that had descended upon his spirit now was more lethargy than resignation. The release of tired nerves, numbed by a sleepless night and a long day in the barrens that he could remember only in snatches.

"To be frank, I feel like a ring-tailed monkey."

"Maybe you should, son, in that rig Just remember you're better-lookin', if that's any comfort."

He came back to Captain Bronson's presence. The skipper of the *Darby Belle* teetered in a ladder-back chair, watching with wry amusement while the president of the Darby Company dressed for his first cotillion.

There was a salty aroma about Bronson that did much to restore one's sense of reality. From the rough broadcloth pea jacket to the stocking cap that nodded at one weathered temple the captain was an authentic man of the sea Those eyes had stared down hurricanes, they could observe a dandy's dressing routine without blinking Toby had been delighted that his favorite skipper had chosen this hour to call Anything was preferable to the certainty that he would soon be capering to music with Martha, under the glare of all Savannah

"Why won't you come to the ball, Captain?"

"Thank you, no I've fought off cannibals, and lived to boast of it. Couldn't take my chances on a pack of gibbering females, Doc. Besides, I've an engagement at the Bird in Hand, with a bowl of cold punch and a roast fowl "

"We could have talked as well tomorrow, you know "

"Not if our loadin' keeps on at the present rate I might even sail with the tide "

Toby looked up sharply from the ministrations of Daniel, the house slave who had just knelt at his feet to pull the

laces of his waistcoat a notch tighter. Bronson's ship, moored snugly at the quay below the bluff, had been taking on tobacco since morning, with a full crew of stevedores assigned to the loading. It was inconceivable that the bulky cargo could have been battened down so soon.

"Did you call for extra dock hands, Captain?"

"'Twas Miss Nancy's idea, not mine. She said she was in charge of the depot durin' your absence. Said that our prime leaf couldn't reach Whitehall too soon."

Toby held his breath as Daniel, pulling with all his strength, lashed the long, plum-red waistcoat as tight as a woman's girdle, and dropped the tails of the clawhammer above his artifice. For the moment he was glad of the need to yield his very breath to fashion. He could hardly admit that he had yielded the Darby depot to Nancy that day, because he could not bear to face her. Or that he had roamed the desolation of tobacco fields for hours on end, without finding the serenity his spirit cried for.

"Say we can catch the tide, Doctor. Shall I slip my cables without warnin', same as always?"

"It's worked in the past. Why not tomorrow?"

Bronson chuckled at the private joke they shared. For her last two voyages the *Darby Belle* had slipped down river, between midnight and sunup, to anchor just inside the harbor bar. Neglecting to publish her orders, Toby had given his skipper a chance to put to sea without warning. Sometimes, if only to vary the pattern, the Darby flagship had lingered at the quayside for days on end before Bronson alerted his crew at an hour's notice and ghosted away to sea.

The precautions had seemed doubly necessary of late—particularly on this voyage, with a fortune in prime leaf aboard. Like every Georgia shipper, the Darby Company had taken its share of losses due to piracy—even when its merchantmen were armed. Bronson, who could handle a running fight as well as any sea wolf, had simply preferred to dodge those coastal scavengers along with their spies in Muskrat Town. Once in the open Atlantic, the *Darby Belle* could show a clean pair of heels to any enemy short of a British man-of-war.

"Shall I so inform Miss Nancy, then?"

"*I'll* inform her, Captain. We'll meet at the Filature in an hour." Bronson lifted his brows, for all the world like a staring walrus, though the twinkle in his eye spoiled that image instantly. "So you'll be dancin' with the lady at last, Doctor. I'd give the world to watch."

"It isn't too late to come along."

"Why d'you need me? Wouldn't be losin' your courage, for all those fine satins?" The captain of the *Darby Belle* had

already hoisted his bulk from the spindly chair. On his feet, despite his stubby build, he seemed to fill the room. Toby, dismissing Daniel at the door, was conscious again of the man's masculine heartiness, of a friendliness that went beyond their common interest.

"Tell me one thing, Captain. Is it wise to—well, to inform Mrs. Gregory of these sailing dates?"

"Why not? She keeps your logbook, don't she?"

"Perhaps I should make a mental note that you plan to sail at dawn. If you do slip out with the tide, we can enter the fact in the register—*after* the event."

"Suit yourself on that, but it's my opinion she knows already. Why else would she drive every husky on the dock since sunup?"

Toby shrugged off the question as he returned to his mirror for a final despairing glance. Nancy's energy had again justified itself, proving, in this case, that the affairs of the Darby depot could march at an even faster tempo when the company's president was outside Savannah. Certainly this was no time to mention his dim, craven suspicion that Nancy, and Nancy alone, was responsible.

For what?

For working through her lover to wreck the company and fatten Pagnol's purse? For warning the Brothers of the Coast—through Pagnol, or by some other avenue—of Darby sailing dates? He had never brought the suspicion in the open before. It was unworthy of Nancy, like mud on the feet of a marble Victory. He permitted it to expand and fill him tonight, until it seemed to press the walls of his brain.

Bronson was rumbling to the door now. "If you'll excuse me, Doc, I've kept that turkey waitin' long enough. Always like a good meal just before I put to sea."

"Suppose I decide to countermand your orders? When's the latest I can get you word?"

Bronson's deep-whiskered face expanded in a heroic grin. Despite that dangling stocking cap, the skipper might have passed for Jason there in the soft bath of candlelight. A common-sense Jason, who knows that the Golden Fleece is a mirage without meaning—and pursues it to the end, for the sake of pursuit.

"Since you're caperin' at the Filature, you can just walk across The Bay and yell down the bluff. I'll be on the quarter deck from midnight on. Don't think I won't hear you."

"Mrs. Gregory and I may stroll down together."

"That, too, will be a sight worth waitin' for." Bronson was gone at that, shaking with muted laughter, his sea boots thud-

ding in cheerful time to the chords that poured up the stairwell. Conscious for the first time of that soft melody, Toby surmised that it was Martha, coquetting as usual at the spinet, in the big drawing room He braced his shoulders, along with his quaking knees, and walked toward her music

The upstairs hall was deep in shadows as dusk invaded the gardens outside the fanlights Nancy's own Negro maid, dozing outside her mistress's door, snapped to her feet to curtsy as the president of the Darby Company strode by, en route to the stairwell The chink of candlelight beneath the door stabbed the corner of his eye So did the rustle of Nancy Gregory's gown as she moved about her room, and hummed as she moved Incredulously, he noted that it was the same tune that Captain Bronson was humming as he vanished down the kitchen stair—the familiar old ballad, spiced with double meanings and rich minor chords, that Martha was strumming in the drawing room

It was like Nancy to hum a slightly risqué air as she put a personal cachet on her ball gown and laid her final plans for trimming him to size Quite like her to linger behind that massive mahogany panel and force him to take the field

He had known to the moment when her portmanteau had arrived from the dock, the precise time that Nancy herself had followed, after her own active day at the depot Watching like a starved ingrate at his window, he had seen her parasol bob across Wright Square, the flounce of her wide gingham work dress as she turned in at the townhouse gate, hearing her step in the hallway, as he skulked in his own half-darkened room, he had fought down the urge to return to the stables, saddle another hunter, and escape again to the doubtful peace of the pine barrens

Now, marching solemnly as a prisoner to the gallows tree, he forced his pace a little, lest she should use that precise moment to confront him It was almost a relief to gain the stairwell at last, to stride through the high archway that gave to the drawing room, and face Martha Darby

He had expected to find her as usual, with her swarm of gallants about her Tonight she seemed alone there in the pools of blond radiance from the great candelabra just above her The candles picked out a dozen high lights from the jewels in her dark hair, from the *rivière* of diamonds at her throat, from the finger rings that flashed along the keyboard. Though he knew that she had marked his entrance instantly, she gave no visible sign save to lift her voice a little, to emphasize the next verse she was chanting so gaily:

"When I was a bachelor, I lived on my own
And worked at the weaver's trade,
And the only thing I ever did that was wrong
Was to woo a fair young maid. . . ."

The whole dusky house seemed alive with that old Scotch ballad tune, so lilting despite its lugubrious minor. Martha sang it with gusto, rolling her fine dark eyes a bit as she approached her next double meaning.

"I wooed her in the wintertime
All through the summer, too,
But the only thing I ever did that was wrong
Was to save her from the foggy, foggy dew!"

Someone chuckled from the shelter of the wing chair beside the fireplace Toby turned toward the sound, grateful to learn that Martha had not been singing for his benefit alone, even though he guessed in advance that Felix Pagnol would rise from that black horsehair ambush to extend a hand in greeting

"Sa voix a la vraie beauté, n'est-ce pas, M. le docteur? La beauté de la terre"

"Ou du diable." Toby found himself biting his replies short, as usual, when Pagnol insisted on French as their medium of exchange Tonight the visitor's magnificence irked him more than ever. Even beside Martha's flaming evening dress the Frenchman was a glass of fashion—a muted symphony in white and gold, with royal orders blazing at his waistcoat, the cross of a Roman knight winking rubies from a riband at his stock

"Do not stare, Doctor," said Pagnol, dropping into his faintly slurred English without a flicker "Believe a connoisseur when I say that you are quite as beautiful as I"

"It's quite true," said Martha. "Are you looking forward to the first reel?"

Toby frowned and took his usual place, a stiff-backed armchair near the door He had chosen that seat by instinct long ago, from its vantage point he could see both hall and drawing room, and, if need be, feign a pressing summons from the former.

"Don't think I'm ungallant, Martha. But you know I'm here tonight under duress"

"That, Doctor, is worse than ungallant," said Pagnol "It's churlish. Even the busiest of men must find time for music, women, and laughter"

Martha tossed her head and let her fingers search out a

few plaintive chords on the spinet. "Do the three always go together, Felix?"

"In my country, they are inseparable. Here, too, if our busy doctor will admit it."

Toby stared hard at Pagnol. To save him, he could not picture the fellow in his pistol sight at this moment One would as soon strike down a too-gorgeous butterfly than place a bullet between his dandy's eyes And yet Pagnol was no coxcomb, despite his manner. If he chose, the Frenchman might still be his friend—or an equally powerful enemy.

"Tell me, Doctor—I'm sure the lovely Mrs Darby won't object to men's talk in her presence—did young Bristol send his seconds today?"

Toby, frowning at the question, found that he was on his feet, roaming the room nervously. He had spoken to no one since that bout at Tondee's Tavern Yet he was sure that the story had run like wildfire over Savannah

"If you've heard that much, sir, you've heard all Young Bristol considers me unworthy of his steel—or his lead"

"Would you permit me to kill him for you as a special favor?"

Martha clapped her hands in mock reproof, with her best pout "No talk of killing in my house, gentlemen"

"D'you object to the death of Harvey Bristol, madame?" Pagnol raised his brows in disbelief. "I've always assumed that you possessed that rarest of female virtues—common sense"

"But it's wicked to talk of killing anyone"

"Even a drone like young Bristol? Believe me, Mistress Darby, he's an excrescence A wart on the great, lusty body of this young giant you call America Excise a few warts. The giant is that much healthier"

"You speak freely of drones and warts, Captain Pagnol. What more are you?"

This time Toby found he was relaxed enough to settle on the massive Sheraton davenport He crossed his satin knees almost calmly Though he could not fathom Martha's reason for championing Harvey Bristol, he was glad of the respite

Pagnol, he observed, had taken her sneer without turning a hair. His handsome, too finely chiseled mouth was still laughing as he leaned across the spinet, his eyes enjoyed the creamy contours of her shoulders and breasts—dwelling on each full-blown curve before he spoke, as only a Frenchman's eyes can dwell

"What you say of me is quite true, Mistress Darby. On the surface I have no visible employment."

Martha leaned back on the piano bench, smiling a little in her turn, as though she enjoyed the compliment of his staring "Of course there have been rumors——"

"I have heard most of them Some say that I've made a career of preying on women Others, that I'm a royal bastard paid to keep clear of Versailles The commonest rumor is that I'm a pirate who finds Savannah a convenient haven. Shall I tell you who I really am—now, in the doctor's presence?"

"Would we believe you?"

"Strong words are not seemly on women's lips Your beauty gives you license to use them charmingly." Again the Frenchman's eyes moved from Martha's breasts to her mercilessly girdled waist Undressing her with a kind of avid daintiness, those eyes seemed to relish every detail

"Proceed, Captain, fables go well with candlelight"

"I assure you that this is no fable Our good doctor here is a student of human ills With luck, he may even prescribe the right cure now and again But I, Mistress Darby, study the whole man That is my lifework, my place of residence is unimportant The fact that I am French is incidental Like that great Englishman who defended your Revolution so eloquently, the world is my country——"

Toby cut in briskly, annoyed by the man's too-convincing purr "D'you compare yourself to Tom Paine, Captain?"

"Only as regards intention, sir I think I may call myself a true revolutionary, I believe I see facts clearly Your recent quarrel with England, in my view, is only a phase of a great unrest that is sweeping the world Next year, or the year after, we may have a similar upheaval in France. Who knows where it will come next? The only certainty is that man himself is struggling to be free"

Martha spoke languidly "Save your politics for the taproom, Felix. We were discussing Harvey Bristol"

"Precisely This young Bristol is an ideal example of the counter-revolutionary"

"No more, please. My head is swimming now"

"You understand me perfectly Your Mr Bristol is a born tyrant, like his father Both of them believe the world was made for princes—and slaves *They* intend to remain princes"

"The world would be dull without princes, Felix And why call him *my* Mr Bristol?"

The Frenchman's face was bland, but his voice dripped malice "It's common knowledge that he paid his first call here since his return to Savannah—and that you received him"

"Could I do less, when he came to pour out his heart?"

"I'm afraid you're endowing him with an organ he doesn't possess"

"Say what you like, Felix, I'll still champion Harvey Bristol Call me romantic, if you insist"

"No one, my temptress, was ever less romantic."

"I say he still loves Nancy D'you challenge that?"

"Most men who have known your sister-in-law end by loving her. Why should young Bristol be the exception?"

Toby, still in his corner of the Sheraton sofa, knew that his cheeks were burning Pagnol's duel with Martha was beginning to find its target. He cut in again, in a voice that was not his own

"Why indeed, Martha?"

"Don't spoil my argument by *agreeing*, gentlemen."

Martha had risen from the spinet as she spoke As though in the arms of an imaginary partner, she whirled gracefully across the parquet, a movement that permitted a brief but disturbing glimpse of openwork stocking above the straps of low-heeled dancing pumps "I'm only telling you that Harvey Bristol has returned here to reopen his suit with Nancy"

Toby spoke acidly "When and if the Darby Company fails—and Nancy's rich again?"

"Exactly What else can the poor boy hope for? He's penniless after that year in England"

"My information is that he has a fortune cached in Nassau," said Pagnol

"You should check your information at the source, Felix Harvey was barely a month in Nassau, he was forced to work his passage to Savannah"

Pagnol spoke as though he had not heard. "They say, too, that his English wife died most mysteriously."

"You wouldn't say that to his face!"

Toby blinked at Martha's vehemence; he had never seen her so aroused before But Pagnol only shrugged "I've offered to shoot him, for Dr Kent's sake Not that the doctor couldn't kill him as easily as I"—he offered Toby a bow—"but I can better spare the time"

"This is a poor subject for joking, Felix." Martha's eyes were still smoldering, though she seemed to have regretted her outburst "Naturally I'll see it doesn't get beyond this room"

"Shall I post him at the vendue house? Or challenge him via the columns of Mr Thatch's *Mercury*?"

"*Mille regrets*, but you'll be wasting your time"

Gabriel had spoken as he entered the room via the french doors that gave to the garden He walked lightly, arching his insteps like a contented cat, and pausing en route to bend

above Martha's hand Toby guessed that Gabe had chosen his entrance deliberately The journalist, as befitted his trade, was not above lingering outside a half-open door, to pick up what gossip he could

"Don't look so annoyed, Martha," said Gabriel "I, too, am bidden to the cotillion this evening. What's more, I'm claiming your first gavotte."

"It is unfortunate that I have already reserved that honor, Mr. Thatch," said Pagnol. "Of course, if you wish to challenge my right——"

Gabriel tossed his hat and gloves on the sideboard and uncapped the wooden brandy bottle that stood there for the refreshment of callers. "One challenge at a time, Captain Pagnol You and I can always find an excuse for meeting. Let's dispose of Bristol first"

"But you have just suggested that he wouldn't fight—even if I posted him"

"Not at all Even assuming the lout can read, he won't be here to accept"

Martha flounced back to the spinet and launched into a rondo "You may talk freely, gentlemen I refuse to listen"

Gabriel ignored the flash of temper as his eyes continued to measure Pagnol "It surprises me a bit, *mon capitaine,* to find you on our side"

"A good journalist should never be surprised," said the Frenchman "He should also put first things first Why can't I prove my—shall we say my admiration for the Darby Company?"

"The reason's simple enough Harvey Bristol left with the afternoon tide—aboard the British merchantman *Ariadne,* to be exact Nassau bound"

"Surely he knows that Dr. Kent's friends would call him out?"

Gabriel shrugged "I myself was on the way to the board with a challenge Surely I had first rights to that pleasure"

Toby settled deeper in his corner Admitting that he should object to this casual discussion of Harvey Bristol's demise, he could not help enjoying it hugely He would have given a great deal to watch Gabriel pin his challenge to the board at the vendue house

That aged structure, which had sheltered Georgia officialdom from Savannah's very beginnings, had outlived its title long ago—though bartering was still conducted under its weather-worn cupola The notice board was an institution in itself Standing just outside the piazza of the vendue house, sheltered from the elements by a white-painted roof of its own, the "vendue board," as it was called, told of ship sailings to

the Continent, and of cattle sales in upland farms; of lost property and of stolen loot that would be returned, at a price, of hopeless love poured out in doggerel, and of ladies who might be had, at a price, in Muskrat Town

Challenges were posted here daily, with and without a flourish of rhetoric Any buck worthy of the name who permitted a call to arms to remain in public view for a day or more was in dishonor thereafter Gabriel himself—as a fighting journalist—had ripped down more than one such challenge and returned it to its writer, wrapped around a bullet

Tonight he could merely shrug off his regret. "Of course, now that the question is academic——"

Pagnol offered both Toby and Gabriel his best smile. "*Affaire entendue,* Monsieur Thatch In the future you shall protect your good friend's interests. I will merely hold myself in reserve."

Toby spoke at last. "If the principal in this matter may say a word——"

"But certainly, Doctor We are only joining hands to protect you from—how shall we say?—minor distractions?"

"Young Bristol is certainly not a coward I don't understand why he turned tail and ran"

"It was his father's doing," said Gabriel "I have that much straight—from Bristol's back fence Apparently there was a thumping war in that mansion last night, after we dropped the body—and the body began to talk. Make no mistake, old Bristol expected his son to kill you there at Tondee's. What's worse, he believed that public opinion would sustain the killing Now that he's proved wrong on both counts, he'll pull back into his cave for a while Young Harvey, having played the fool once again, is simply banished"

"Don't think that Matthew Bristol will stay in his cave forever"

"Have I ever underestimated our enemies?" Gabriel chuckled and poured again from the brandy bottle "The point is, you won a real victory last night He's shrewd enough to own it—in his black heart, at least There'll be no more gouging and no more swagger from Harvey They'll fight you in other ways hereafter In the market place, with Harvey's British backing In the Medical Association, when I've elected you as health officer" Gabriel drank deeply and smacked his lips "I hope you'll enjoy that battle as much as I"

Martha struck a series of towering chords and rose from the spinet "Enough for one evening, gentlemen *I'm* ready for the cotillion Dr Kent is promised as my escort—if he can forget his grudge and think of dancing"

"Grudge, my dear, is a poor name for war to the death,"

said Pagnol "Why can't you face that frankly? And why, above all, must you insist that young Bristol is a gentleman and not a bully?"

Martha did not bridle this time; instead, she offered them her softest smile. "May an untutored female express her sympathy for man in his defeat—or is that, too, forbidden?"

"By no means. But it's my guess you have deeper reasons."

"Think what you like of me, Felix. Just surrender my doctor for tonight."

Martha's hand closed on Toby's arm as she spoke; her eyes lifted him to her side like a tangible magnet. He surrendered to the pull for a moment.

"Won't you wait for your sister-in-law?"

"Nancy may make her own entrance—at her own time. When I attend the Filature, I go for the dancing."

"And you, Doctor?" said Pagnol

Toby smiled bleakly "Shall we say that I attend as a puppet on a silken thread?"

"An excellent simile, since the Filature was once dedicated to the silkworm. May I add that you seem a willing victim?"

"Could I be otherwise in present company?"

He swept Martha into the hall with the compliment, taking her wrap from Jubal's hands and folding it—as casually as he could—about her opulent charms Calm enough, now that the evening was under way, he could even take time to note how strikingly its white-satin facings and prodigal ermine tails contrasted with the boldly slashed black-and-white contours of her ball gown, the black-glass sheen of her hair.

"Pray God that Gabe stays with the brandy," she whispered.

"Pray God that he doesn't!"

"Would you walk me through the Trustees' Garden, on a dare?"

"Not if my life hung on the result."

"Are you afraid of yourself, Toby, or of me?"

"Shall I say I'm afraid for us both?"

"That'll do nicely—for now," she said, in that same vibrant whisper, and drew back a little, with her fingers still burning his arm, as Gabriel set down his glass and strolled out in their wake

Pagnol had already seated himself at the spinet, with the air of a man who had found his second home The Frenchman's fingers, dancing down the yellowed ivory of the keyboard, teased their own magic from that fragile instrument. It was the same Mozart rondo that Martha had played just a moment ago Under Pagnol's hands, it took on a cobweb delicacy, a pattern that was its own excuse for being

"No man has a right to interpret so perfectly," said

Gabriel "Especially a composer Martha has just murdered in cold blood"

Martha surveyed the journalist without visible rancor. "Someday, my dear Gabe, *you'll* be murdered as you deserve Will you give me your arm, too, so we may shock Savannah in earnest?"

They walked into the dusk on that note, the full-flounced panels of Martha's gown making a brave sweep on the portico. Already they seemed to move to music Toby was positive that he could hear the sighing of violins there in the dusk, a ghostly counterpoint to the rondo that Pagnol was playing so brilliantly And then, as they moved from portico to garden path —and from the pathway to the gateposts that gave to the square—he knew that the faint humming was real Nancy, behind her own half-opened window on the floor above, had picked up the melody and was singing it softly as she dressed

Blessing Gabriel for his facile chatter, he turned to look back just after they swung into the sidewalk that led to the Filature. The humming had ceased abruptly, though Pagnol's fingers were nimble as ever on the keyboard Toby felt his heart turn over in earnest as he lifted his eyes to Nancy's window Even before a white hand parted the curtains gently there was no mistaking the silhouette in that lighted frame No doubting the fact that Nancy had marked his departure, with Martha Darby clinging to his arm

All at once he found that he was humming with the others and daring to let his toes twinkle into an impromptu dance step Without meeting Martha's eyes he sensed that she, too, was moving to unheard music—that Gabriel, sensitive as always to female moods, had capered into the same gay tempo

Whitaker Street, deep in its tunnel of new mulberry leaves, received them gravely Dancing rather than walking, humming that same wordless tune among themselves, they moved on toward the Filature—three sandpapered bumpkins in the finest French satins, letting Mozart die away behind them, straining their ears for the throb of the first minuet

ii

Sipping his brandy in the breezeway letting the music envelop him in its warm flood Toby looked hard at the painted silkworm high up on the proscenium arch The musicians sat on the stage of the Filature tonight pounding their instruments lustily—back-country boys, with back-country rhythms, for all their finicking smallclothes and bravely powdered wigs Thanks to the bath of light from the six candelabra

above the dance floor, the silkworm was surrounded in an aureole of its own, like a presiding god at the revels.

The symbol was worth pondering, reflected Toby, as he stood there, waiting for Martha So far the ritual of the dance had gone like clockwork each minute had ticked off precisely as he had visioned it in advance The stately procession of Savannah's gentlefolk in the growing dusk, converging on the Filature from grave, brick-fronted street and fresh-leafed square, from houses along The Bay, from creaking barouche and country chaise Slim-flanked gallant, with temper gleaming from his brandy-bright eye, aged magistrate and lawyer and beetlebrowed merchant, bowing wives and daughters to the sanctuary of a box beside the dance floor Old lady Tyree, who arrived in one of the town's three surviving sedan chairs, manned by two sweating slaves, stumping up the stair to the dowagers' corner, with rouge flaunting like battle flags on her dewlaps, old Bristol himself, braving the stares and the whispers, if only for the pleasure of staring down his rival

Where was Bristol now? Toby finished his brandy and strolled from breezeway to dance floor, to make certain that his enemy had not dared to step into the swirl of the reel He let his eye roam the hot, candle-lighted room until he marked Bristol, deep in talk with Tyree beside the impromptu bar It was an excellent moment to brazen things out. Besides, he needed another drink while he waited for Martha.

But he lingered a moment more, staring up at the silkworm. Deep-bowered in mulberry leaves, the symbol of the Filature stared down at tonight's revels through apocryphal eyes Those eyes were part of the artist's dream picture of a dream silkworm Like the Filature itself that bloated creature belonged to the half-world where untested visions wait for the first harsh buffet of reality Like Oglethorpe's own dream and the fortune that had been poured into silk when Georgia was in its colonial swaddling clothes The elaborate machinery that had come from Clydebank and the English Midlands to make this dream a reality was not even rust today The drying frames that had once waited to receive the cocoons had been consigned to other, more tenacious worms

Only a painted worm remained of that vision Only the mulberry trees that lined so many of Savannah's streets today Only the men who had come with their slaves and their English gold, when Utopia began to tarnish at the edges . . The music ended in a crash of cymbals, the final wail of a clarinet Dr Tobias Kent brushed aside the skein of his own imagery and stalked toward the brandy.

It was pleasant to feel blood pound at his temples as he crossed the dance floor, a de onair figure in his tight black

clawhammer, a power in the community who could look any man in the eye and dare him to turn aside. Pleasant to stand at the plank bar and ask for armagnac. Best of all was old Tyree's slight bow, the lifted goblet in the blue-veined fist.

"Servant, Dr. Kent—and good wishes"

"And what's your opinion now, sir, of our cure for peripneumonia?"

His voice, he noted, was clear as Christ Church bell, and just as resonant The silence that clamped on the knot of drinkers was just as reassuring. So, for that matter, was the studied grimness of Matthew Bristol's back, as the old doctor turned to stare out of a window at nothing in particular—and old Tyree's chirping answer across Bristol's shoulder.

"You and Roy are to be congratulated, Doctor. Didn't I say as much at the last meeting?"

"You did indeed. Did you know that we've a dozen new cures on the books since March?"

Even across the ambuscade of that taut shoulder Toby could sense Tyree's interest He talked on for a moment more, answering the older man's questions with all the care he would have bestowed on an examiner at Edinburgh. What did the silence matter, or the stares that he met above the punch bowl? He could ignore them now as coolly as he ignored Bristol's monumental back. Tyree was listening, and Tyree was president of the Medical Association of Savannah.

"Don't you even hear the music, Toby? You promised me the first gavotte."

He came back to Martha and the sprightly rhythm that had begun to send couple after couple spinning across the floor. Oddly enough, it was Martha who had taught him that same bouncing step years ago, on the landing at Clay Creek, with French Lonny's fiddle for an orchestra and Gabriel's thumping palms to set the tempo He felt his spirits lift with his feet as he bowed to Tyree and spun Martha into the first whirling figure.

"Stop me if I'm wrong," he said. "But I believe that even Tyree admits I'm here to stay, now."

The last brandy, he perceived, had loosened his tongue a little, even as it inspired his flying feet Martha laughed aloud and let him spin her madly He was not too shocked to catch an aroma of brandy on her own breath He had seen her disappear with Gabriel just before the last dance ended, and knew that the journalist always carried a flask for emergencies of this nature

"You've belonged from the start, Toby. Why didn't you come here sooner—and prove it?"

"I belong, as you put it, only because the Darby Company

is profitable And because the Darby hospital is keeping Savannah well for the first time The planters must respect me—or pretend to—because they can't ship their crops without me The doctors must be civil, for fear I'll take their practice "

In vino veritas, he thought, feeling the old bitterness descend again. Perhaps I'm a parvenu after all, glorying in a cheap victory. He came back to Martha as she laughed—so loudly, this time, that heads turned among the dancers

"Don't carry a chip on both shoulders Toby Tonight you're proving you know how to play While you're about it, prove that people like you for yourself "

"That'll take a deal of proving."

"There isn't a woman in this room who wouldn't give an eye tooth to dance with you if——"

"If their husbands would permit it?"

"You've nothing to fear from the husbands Haven't you just said as much?"

"Nothing but a dozen challenges in the morning."

"You've fought your last duel in Savannah Felix Pagnol was right when he said you'd arrived for good Tonight could be your turning point. You could start winning the husbands through the wives "

"As you've won the wives through the husbands?"

"Laugh at me all you like I know I've a bad name in this town. But I'm still Mistress Roy Darby; and I can fill out my escort's dance program as I like "

He whirled her for a moment in silence This was a new Martha—a worldly, supple Martha, willing to share him, pro tem, for his own advancement Her body—a knowing instrument even in those ruthless stays—neither sought nor rejected him tonight, for once, like Martha herself, it seemed satisfied with its lot .   Catching Gabriel's glance as they spun past the breezeway door, he was not surprised to see his eye close in a meaning wink

Aloud he said only, "I'm sure you could mold me as you like, Martha Unfortunately, I refuse to be molded "

"Don't be a fool I wouldn't change you if I could I only want you to *know* these people To get over your belief that they're a different breed " She was close in his arms now as the gavotte blared into its final measures "I want you to outgrow Savannah, to see it's only a beginning for us "

"What are you saying, Martha?"

"Last night you told me that the devil made me well I'll never forget that compliment "

"I'll stand by it tonight "

"And I'll prove I'm your one true friend before we finish

here Call me a wanton in the meantime. What else could I be, while I waited for you?"

She had spoken in a vibrant whisper, the eyes she lifted to his were humid with passion now Thank God for Gabriel, waiting there in the breezeway, he thought swiftly.

"People will hear you, Martha."

"Never mind people *I've* outgrown these relics long ago. How long must I wait for *you* to outgrow them too?"

He stared about him wildly, glad that they were dancing under the braying cornets in the orchestra, glad that the music was at the top of its crescendo. "Have you forgotten that your husband is part of this?"

"We've disposed of Roy, you know. Roy is just a convenience—until you make up your mind about me Until you discover that Savannah is just a stepping stone——" The music ended, and she withdrew punctiliously from his arms, accepting his bow with a deep curtsy, even as she lifted one lace-mitted hand for his kiss

"When you've made that discovery, Toby Kent, I think we'll be ready to leave Savannah together. Think about it a bit, you'll find me well worth having" She spoke in the barest of correct whispers now, letting the rest die as Gabriel Thatch snapped to her side "Will you accept a breath of air, Mistress, and a little refreshment?"

"Gladly, Mr Thatch Thank you for a rewarding dance, Doctor It's pleasant to find a man with a true sense of rhythm"

"And pleasanter still to go from one to the other," wondered Gabriel

"Perhaps you understand me too well for comfort, Mr. Thatch" Martha tossed Toby a dazzling smile and left the floor on Gabriel's arm Along with most of Savannah he watched the journalist whisk her through the breezeway door without even the precaution of a backward glance

A hand closed gently on his elbow Still dazed by Martha's bare-faced attack, he turned to face Pagnol

"If you'll oblige, sir," said the Frenchman, "Mrs Gregory would like more of the same"

"Pardon?"

"Madame vient d'arriver Regardez là-bas"

Turning to the far end of the hall, he was just in time to see Nancy spreading her wrap across the railing of the Darby box Nancy herself, all in leaf-green, with a small crown of golden flowers in her hair, seemed demure as any dowager. He stared at her stupidly for a momoent as his mind fumbled at her invitation

"More of the same, you said?"

"Mrs Gregory had the pleasure of witnessing your gavotte from the landing She has just commanded a reprise from the orchestra Will you dance it with her, Doctor?"

He had expected anything but this pretense of a truce, he told himself Anything but the clear smile of welcome she offered him across the empty floor. But he found himself walking toward that smile with Felix Pagnol's hand still gentle at his elbow. Found that he could scrape out a bow at the box rail as skillfully as any dandy in the Filature

"This is an honor long overdue, Mrs Gregory, if I may speak my mind."

"I can echo your sentiment heartily, Dr Kent"

The music began with her small, breathless pause, as though the leader of the orchestra had taken it as his cue. The great oval of the floor was empty when she stepped down from her box and into his arms It was still empty when they went into their first skipping turn, and empty still, after they had taken their initial whirl around the room Dancing in a dream, with his partner light as down between his hands, Toby waited breathless for the awakening

iii

"You won't believe this, Doctor," said Nancy at last, "but I meant every word"

"You always have, Mrs Gregory. How can I doubt you now?"

Her cheek, so close to his, as they spun in the dance, was marble cool, and pale as that same stone It was the only clue that he had, the only reassurance that she was no less tense than he, as they composed their quarrel publicly, for the benefit of a whole staring community Spread-eagling his fingers on her whalebone-stiff back, he drew her just a fraction closer, and thought how swiftly that same cool cheek would flame if he dared to press a kiss, there where her shoulder sloped to the first faint swelling of her breast—sensed, rather than seen in the arabesque of lace that edged her forest-green ball gown . . .

"Careful, Doctor!"

"Sorry, I'm a bit giddy with all this spinning Unfamiliar exercise, you know Shall we reverse?"

He blessed his fluency as she matched her steps with his own The mere thought of that caress, beating at his temples like a hammer-blow, had all but felled him in his tracks

"Unfamiliar or not," she said, "you dance wonderfully"

"As wonderfully as I dispense your father's fortune?"

"This is a *soirée de gala* Must we have reproaches?"

"That's what I'm asking *you*, Mrs Gregory"

"Be frank," she said "Why do you think I lured you here?"

"Did you say *lure?*"

"Dared, then," she said, with a ghost of a smile—and nodded, with perfect composure, to the first of the couples entering the floor. "After my note, and my inexcusable reference to your dress, I was positive you'd come. Of course I made doubly sure by instructing Felix to—how shall I say? —keep after you"

"And Roy—and Martha?"

"And Roy—and Martha." she said "Has it occurred to you that we're one happy family more or less? And that you're the only determined outsider?"

"It's occurred to me often"

"Isn't a year a long time to sulk outside the door and wonder what the family's doing?"

"So you invited me tonight to welcome me to the circle?"

"To suggest that we follow an honored Yamacraw custom and bury the hatchet In the Georgia earth, not in each other"

"Go on," he said "This is music to my ears Unfamiliar music, I'll grant you, but——"

They danced on for a moment. The floor was full now; the belles and bucks of Savannah, having stared their fill, had surrendered to the music pair by pair He stared back at them now with hostile eyes, swinging his own turns in wide, all-but-insolent arcs, striving to keep his portion of the floor inviolate Already the magic of Nancy's first yielding had begun to tarnish a little, to take on a spurious look

"You're wondering why I've changed," she said at last. "I can't say I blame you"

"Perhaps you haven't changed at all Tomorrow I'll know I dreamed this"

"I'll say this much tonight," she murmured, and he was astounded to see her long lashes droop as coquettishly as any girl's on the floor "Now that we enter our final year, I would like to know you better"

"You've known all you cared to know from the start"

"Perhaps But will you help me to—to *understand* you a little—if I return the compliment?"

"It was your quarrel," he said "This is your respite—if that's the right word"

"It isnt' quite," admitted Nancy, with her lashes still demurely lowered "And don't think we're allies simply because we're dancing together before all Savannah I did

hope that we might be something better than enemies for this final year "

"You've used that phrase twice. Why should the year we're now entering be final?"

"I can still hope, can't I?"

"As Victor Darby's daughter—or the owner of Sangaree?"

"From both viewpoints. I oppose the Darby Company as a landowner, I oppose it as a Darby heir As one of its directors, I've no choice but to serve it well. But I'll oppose its principle to the end—and beyond."

"Then we're still enemies."

"Not of necessity. Look about you, Doctor. Savannah is still full of unrepentant Tories Whole families who go on hoping that we'll prove too weak to govern ourselves and return to the British fold I disagree with *their* beliefs I disagreed with my husband when—when he chose the British. Many of those people are my friends Free to their opinions "

"How does this concern me, Mrs Gregory?"

"I'm merely saying that it pays to conform, or at least to admit there are other points of view."

"Perhaps you're more adaptable than I. Or should I say more civilized?"

"In a moment you'll remark that he who is not with me is against me."

"At this point in our history I feel that we can't afford the luxury of too many Tories in our midst The Darby Company is democracy in microcosm *You're* a luxury we can't afford indefinitely—if you continue to oppose us "

Nancy's laughter had the ring of sincerity. "Are you thinking of discharging me?"

"You know that's impossible "

"But you'd prefer I withdrew as a director in the company, lived all the time at Sangaree, and took what profits you'd grant me?"

He drew a deep breath "It might be simpler—for us all."

"Including myself, you mean?"

"Since you won't meet me all the way."

The music sighed to a stop for an instant, and they stood apart Nancy clapped her hands softly, she seemed more amused than hurt by his suggestion "I'm applauding you as well as our musicians Why do you never fail to rise to an occasion?"

"In other words, why am I so stubborn?"

"You speak of an ideal democracy, and offer the Darby Company as an example Even a perfect democracy needs at least one balance wheel—or should I say one sound busi-

ness head? Can you deny I've contributed that much, at least?"

"I'm grateful, Mrs. Gregory. More than grateful. It doesn't seem fair to accept your help, when——"

"When I haven't endorsed you entirely?"

"Would it be too great an effort to—to shake my hand and wish me well this final year?"

"Would it hurt you too much to accept me as I am, since I can't give you more?"

"Perhaps I'd rather wait," he said, and took her in his arms as the music spun them together.

"Wait for what, Doctor?"

"Until you can give me everything. Until you'll admit I'm right about the company—and its future"

"And until then we stand at swords' points?"

"Do you find it too great a strain?"

"Speak for yourself."

"I asked you first"

"It's a woman's privilege to answer a question with another."

"I stand on the facts," he said "Don't blame me if I'm a bit suspicious when you offer to—shall we say let down the first bar?"

"At least believe me when I say the offer's in good faith."

He found that he could grin almost naturally, despite his wildly beating heart "Just what does it entail?"

"Command performances such as these If only for the sake of form" She offered him her best smile again as he twirled her down the length of the dowagers' boxes and the dowagers' icy stares. "Admit you enjoy dancing with me, at least"

"I'll admit that much, gladly"

"This is the first command performance. The next is dinner at Sangaree. Tomorrow, after we've inspected the rice paddies"

"Since you insist, Mrs Gregory."

"I won't ask why you've stayed away until now," she said slowly "I can guess that much, on my own."

"Perhaps, if you'd asked me sooner——"

"Come to Sangaree, then I'll have a slave waiting to pole us over the fields. Then I'll give you dinner Along with Roy and Felix, if I can lure them out tomorrow" She hesitated, then went on resolutely. "We might even sail out together from the depot It'll save time"

"Am I hearing rightly?"

"I think we should talk, Doctor. Perhaps, if I could make you see *me* clearly——" She paused as though she had been

on the point of saying far more "Who knows? We might bury that hatchet permanently."

"Not until you'll wish me luck," he said. "If that makes me a country mule, I'll accept the label."

"Country mules are one thing," said Nancy. "Country gentlemen are another. With encouragement, they may even see the error of their ways"

"And join the city gentlemen against the mob?"

But Nancy merely smiled "Remember your first night in Savannah, Doctor? And the tests you passed with flying colors?"

"I remember all too vividly."

"That night I decided you were honest—that you were suffering from no worse a disease than acute integrity This morning, when I went over our first year's accounting with Sam, I made an even more agreeable discovery I learned that you were kind as well as honest. Those virtues should be combined more often"

"If you're referring to the shares I distributed at Darbyville——"

"You must have realized that you were giving away our whole first year's profits, and a bit besides," said Nancy slowly "Even a born Utopian could manage that much arithmetic"

"I realized it all too well. And looked forward to an outburst from you."

"Eight thousand British pounds," said Nancy "And you gave it all away. You let a half-hundred mudsill farmers plow it into *their* land"

"Instead of letting it soak in *our* treasury" He looked at her earnestly, but her face was a bland enigma now "Thank you for calling it generous You might have used a harsher word"

"Your share of that windfall would have been over three thousand You could buy a London practice with that—and a wife to boot."

"That money came from Georgia earth I preferred to plow it back"

Again she spoke as though she had not heard "Sam figured we'd lose at least ten thousand in London bills Instead, we turned eight thousand profit."

"Thanks to your help"

"And your luck, Doctor Suppose that luck is bad from now on?"

"Then I'd admit you've won—and bow out as gracefully as a country mule can bow"

"The chances are better than even that I'll win—thanks

to your generosity. If you'd hoarded that eight thousand, you could have shown Judge Armstrong a tidy set of books and made the company permanent."

"That's something I still hope for."

"The averages are against you They're against all men who combine generosity and business. Of course I could be entirely wrong about you "

"Is that something else you'll investigate tomorrow?"

She smiled one more time, and seemed to withdraw from him a little, even as she rested in the curve of his arms. "You could be a genius—with a green thumb and the Midas touch. Enough plain people think as much "

"Don't make me more ridiculous than I am. Actually, I'm only a doctor who would prefer to live for his medicine alone A doctor who wants to be friends with the city of his adoption."

"Would you stay on if the company failed?"

I'd stay on as a stevedore in Muskrat Town, he thought. As a slave in your rice field. As a stableboy at Tondee's—if only to glimpse you as you rode across your hand-tamed acres. . . . Aloud he said only, "If Roy would have me—yes "

"And suppose you win? Suppose the company prospers beyond your dreams? What then?"

"Then I'd stay on until the dream was a reality Until the company could function without me " Their eyes held in earnest now, he read the hot spark, deep in her own irises, and let the image complete itself. "You, of course, would find a way to keep Sangaree "

"Perhaps I'd own defeat, and go abroad "

"That's nonsense *You're* Georgia too."

"I couldn't keep Sangaree without help."

"But surely Captain Pagnol——"

"Captain Pagnol, Doctor, has merely contributed a—certain sum to the rebuilding of the main house I might add that I've sunk even more of my own money in the same project " Nancy's voice was oddly lifeless "If you must know, Sangaree is mortgaged to the hilt Now that the rice crop is going in, I can feed my slaves again The plantation itself will never come back to what it was, until——" She hesitated on that, then completed her thought with a flash of spirit, "—until I've a free hand with the Darby fortune "

"And naturally Sangaree is more important than the success of the company."

"Naturally "

"Suppose you could count on five thousand British pounds as your yearly share Suppose we guarantee to keep your

slaves in food, and your threshing floors in repair Would that be—well, enough to satisfy you?"

"Five thousand British pounds would hardly pay my gardeners and my dike men Sangaree was the largest rice plantation south of Charleston before the war began. I mean to bring it back—make it even larger—and keep the profits" She stepped out of his arms as the music ended "Does that put us back where we started, or will you still sail out with me tomorrow?"

Toby returned her smile even as he felt his own lips tighten "When will you give up your pride, Nancy Gregory?"

"Don't dignify my love of land with such a noble name"

"Are you sure it isn't love of power?"

"Can you have power without land? Or land without power?" He bowed above her hand as she curtsied deeply. "Evidently we're to go on fighting to the end"

"But you'll come to Sangaree at last?"

"Tomorrow at seven, on the pier," he said "It's high time I saw you in your habitat"

He stared about him wildly then, realizing that they stood alone in the center of that vast waxed desert of floor—pinned there for a long, suspended moment by the thrust of a hundred stares Come what may, he thought, our next battle can be no stranger than this encounter He shook off the conviction that her victory had been all but complete—the even gloomier certainty that she would be victorious always Offering her his arm, he led her to her box, as punctiliously as an acolyte with a sacred relic

Pagnol, bowing from the waist, received them gravely.

"To say that you were the cynosure of all eyes would state the case mildly"

Nancy put a hand on the Frenchman's arm "No more, Felix, if you please The doctor has been badgered enough tonight So, for that matter, have I" Her eyes flashed an order more compelling than her words Once again Toby's heart turned sick as he observed a *rapport* that needed no laws

"Your steps suit so beautifully," murmured Pagnol "Why can't your minds dance together too?"

"Perhaps I've a mind that doesn't enjoy dancing," said Toby "Especially when someone else pipes the tune" He bowed again "Your servant, Mistress Gregory, until tomorrow"

He knew his neck was flaming as he marched from dance floor to breezeway, without daring a glance to left or right Just in time he realized that the tightly embraced couple,

there in the deep shadow of the bougainvillaea vines, were Gabriel and Martha, and turned sharply to gain the street. Threading among the tethered horses at the rack, enjoying the tug of the sandy road against his dancing pumps, he took a certain pleasure in pausing deliberately, peeling off both shoes and stockings, and continuing down Whitaker Street barefoot

When he reached The Bay, and paused at the long ramp that led down to the Darby depot, the worst of his rage had spent itself. In fact, he found that he could stare down at the lights of the shipping in the tidal reach and count the Darby spars against the starlight with something approaching calm It did not even matter too much if Nancy and Pagnol were laughing at him now, as they whirled to a new measure Or if Savannah, whispering madly behind a score of fans, had decided that the president of the Darby Company had surrendered before his time

There, with a full suit of canvas waiting to be spread, was the low-raked silhouette of the *Darby Belle,* nuzzling the stringpiece of the long wharf, as though begging for release As he watched, he heard Captain Bronson bark a final order, heard a hawser slap the wharf wetly The barkentine's stern eased into the tug of the tide For an instant he could almost see the square-rigged skipper take a last turn of his deck and stare up at the bluff, as though awaiting some last-minute word Then the bowline slapped free in turn The *Darby Belle,* turning sweetly in the freshening current, set her nose for the open Atlantic as the first staysails filled along the bowsprit

An hour ago he would have envied Bronson that escape Just as he would have envied Roy, so tranquil, now, there in the lighted dispensary of the clinic pounding his endless pestles—happy in a dedication that canceled such imponderables as profits and faithless wives For the present it was enough to stand barefoot in his fine silken smallclothes, fling his coat into the sandy ruts of the roadway, and curse royally, with no listeners but the stars

More than enough to admit, in his heart of hearts, that a stand-up fight with Nancy Darby Gregory was worth any escape—no matter how numerous her victories

iv

Last night the *Darby Belle* had danced, impatient as any sea witch, at that same mooring This bright spring morning Nancy's catboat seemed a diminutive edition of that tall-masted vessel as she trod a measure of her own on the crest

of the tide Watching that dance from his office window, and pressing a cold towel to his temples as he watched, Dr. Tobias Kent knew that Nancy herself had warped the cat into its mooring just this side of dawn That it was Nancy's slaves, and none other, who had stowed the sail cover and broken out the jib and mainsail, while Nancy's passenger-to-be, still contrite after a sleepless session with the bottle, put off the moment when he must join her.

A sleepless night with the bottle He faced the unholy memory squarely, in the clear, lemon-colored morning He had drunk deep while he fumbled for the courage to return to the Filature, before the dance ended While he debated the wisdom of claiming Martha, or a doxy at the Bird in Hand, in that precise order In the end, it had seemed easier to shuck his finery, to open a bottle in the frame of his office window, and to brood away what was left of the night.

A door slammed below, and he heard a telltale, mousy rattle of papers in the big office downstairs—a sure sign that Leary, or one of the apprentices, was readying the desks for another day. He could not sit here forever, with his head swathed like an infidel Turk's, until his own staff found him He made a great point of stumping to the armoire in the corner, where a fresh change of linen always awaited him—a soft shirt, half-open at the throat under a loosely tied black stock, a roomy suit of white cotton drill, tucked into jack boots at the knee, topped by a round planter's hat. It was a standard costume for his river journeys, and he checked it in the glass before he combed and tied his hair. His eyes were clear enough, even in the light of morning. There was hardly a tremor in his hands as he set the hat at a not-too-jaunty angle and stumped from depot to dockside as casually as any mate returning to his ship after a night under the bluff.

He knew a short moment of panic when he followed the stringpiece to the catboat's mooring, and admitted, too late, that he should have appeared by way of the ramp What would Nancy think of him, if she saw him emerge from the office block, and realized that he had lurked there, like a lovesick schoolboy, for his appointed hour? His spirits lifted, while he paused in the ambush of an empty hogshead and conned the aparently empty cockpit Perhaps she, too, would be late—if only for the sake of form

"Good morning, Doctor Did you sleep soundly after the ball?"

She was seated in a deep nest of lumber that waited its turn to be lifted to the decks of a coastal snow This morning she was all in country calico, with the familiar handker-

chief knotted about her copper hair and its twin tied, bandanna fashion, at her throat He felt his breath catch, though it was a familiar discovery that she was a shade lovelier than he remembered As always, he spoke quickly, driving the homage from his voice as remorselessly as any man might banish a traitor in his midst

"If you must know, I didn't sleep at all."

"Don't tell me you sat up with your ledgers."

So she had seen him emerge from the office block. "I sat up with you, Mrs Gregory."

"With *me*, Doctor?"

As I've sat up with you a hundred nights this past year, he added silently With the image of your beauty and your quiet mockery. With the memory of your lips and laughter. The touch of your hand—it was both cool and clinging—in the dance, and the way the hair parts in a peak on your forehead With the need to possess you, and the knowledge that you can never be possessed . . Aloud he said only, "With schemes to win you, Mrs Gregory. To my cause, of course"

"Do you expect them to bear fruit today?"

"The fruit is already barren," he said, and stepped down to the dancing deck of the catboat.

"So you've discovered that I can't be won?"

He managed a smile "Don't ask me to own defeat so soon Shall we cast off?"

"My Negroes will make the boat ready," she said

He steadied himself against the stringpiece as she laughed down at him, and noted that two slaves had appeared from the open doorway of the ship chandler's to brace the mainsail The Negroes moved about their work quietly, ignoring his presence on the tiny deck Nancy ignored them in turn as she continued to chat around Toby's silence.

"Naturally, Doctor, I didn't think you'd forget a promise—or a lonely lady"

"You don't believe I sat out the night Is that it?"

"Frankly, you look more rested than I"

"That I'll not endorse, Mrs Gregory. You're fresh as the dawn"

"A compliment at last? Now I *will* come aboard"

She took his hand as she rose, her wide calico skirt billowing gracefully in the breeze as she stepped from dock to deck For the first time he noticed the diamond blazing on one hand, the vivid emerald clip that held the bandanna to her hair. The slaves whisked overside Hip-deep in the river to steady the gunwales, they eased the catboat toward deeper water At that precise instant the rising sun, slanting

downward above the roofs along The Bay, bathed both ship and mainsail in its glow—striking highlights from the emerald clip at Nancy's temple, touching her white rounded arms with its magic.

For no reason at all Toby found himself thinking of Pagnol's silken shadow—and the greater shadow of the world that had spawned him The Versailles he had never glimpsed, and a madcap queen who milked cows for sport from a jewel-studded stool Savannah harbor and a purse-proud girl who sailed a catboat with jewels in her hair and a slave at either gunwale . . . Were the two so far apart, after all?

"Still brooding, Doctor?"

He came out of his reverie as the boom swung gently, and saw that Nancy had already taken the tiller.

"Are these boys coming aboard?"

"They're leaving us now," she said, and pressed her rudder to catch the first breath of wind Black hands, leaning hard on either gunwale, gave the catboat a final shove to deep water

"You're the crew," she said. "I trust you'll take orders until we reach Sangaree."

"We're crossing to your world," he said "Use me as you will"

But there was no need for orders at the moment Spinning away from the water front, the catboat had taken the wind square on the shoulder of her forepeak, her bowsprit skimming the brown surface of the river inshore, her cutwater creaming Toby kicked off his jack boots and ran forward to secure the jib, as naturally as though he had always worked aboard Just as naturally Nancy leaned hard on the tiller, nursing the last thrust of the wind, forcing her one-man crew to scramble to the upper gunwale as the little vessel stood on one ear in the fresh morning breeze

"We'll come about at the channel buoy," she said "Keep your weight where it is This breeze always holds until we fetch the lee of the island"

Toby knuckled his forehead smartly She smiled at the nautical by-play even as her eyes judged the hawser of the nearest brig and skimmed it with inches to spare Already Savannah was opening out behind them in geometric order, a model town bathed in sunlight and morning silence He counted landmarks along The Bay, the proud houses muffled to the eaves in their own green disdain Remembering how the town had welcomed him once—and how the ghost of that welcome had lingered with each return—he wondered at the hostile image Was it possible that he was seeing Savannah, through Nancy's eyes, for the first time? Or was Nancy's own

veiled hostility staring back at him from the eye sockets of the town's windows?

"Lean out, Doctor," said Nancy "Lean out, and wet your topknot I'm easing off a point, and seeing if we can turn turtle "

He held his breath, watching the boom end dip under the savage thrust of the wind, until it seemed that the mainsail would scoop into the racing brown flood Then, as he threw his whole weight across the upper gunwale, he felt the catboat steady and pick up still another notch of speed . . . When he dared to look again, they were clear of the harbor shipping and racing toward the last channel marker with every stitch of canvas taut

The river, white with cross chop, had begun to shade away from brown to pale aquamarine, a mirage-like blue under the spring morning There, to the north, was the swampy point of Hutchinson's Island, the cutover barrens of the island's low hump and the apron of rice fields, trampled even now by hungry cattle, wreathed with the smoke of squatters' fires Behind them Savannah had already begun to merge with the green-brown swamps that hemmed the bluff on three sides Even as he watched, the palisade of Fort Wayne took shape in the misty morning, its flagstaff already rising triumphant into sunlight From habit he came to attention smartly, bracing against the mast to whip one hand into a salute as they ran by the thirteen circled stars of union whipping atop that shaved lightwood pole

He turned away instantly, a bit ashamed of that burst of patriotism To his amazement, Nancy Gregory's own hand was still raised in a salute to the flag

"I'm glad there's one thing we agree on, Doctor," she murmured

"Meaning?"

"America is here to stay, at least."

There was no time for more Beyond the ramparts of the port the bluff shelved off rapidly, to the east, the riverbank was flat, merging into swamps from shore to horizon rim. The eastern tip of Hutchinson's Island spun past their port bow, a squad of Negroes, diking the long sweep of paddies that marked that portion of the island with its endless faint-green checkerboard, shouted a greeting as their bowsprit tossed white water a scant hundred feet offshore

"Stand by to come about!"

"Aye, aye, skipper "

The maneuver was handled smartly, though he wet one trouser leg to the knee as he scrambled to cleat down the jib The catboat, spinning on her heel, took the wind on

her starboard quarter and raced for the tidal reach to the southeast

"Will this breeze hold after the sun's really up?"

"It generally does in March We should fetch the Sangaree dock in another hour."

The river air had cleared his head magically. He found that he could settle against the cockpit wall—in the very spot Felix Pagnol had once graced—and meet Nancy's eyes with a fair imitation of serenity. The fact that they were alone on the river, with only a few staring cranes for company, would register in a moment and bring its own unease. For the present it was enough just to relax

"Stand by to come about!"

This time the bowsprit had all but raked the low sand dunes of Barnwell Island He watched Nancy spin her rudder, and noted the spout of sand under their centerboard as they danced away for the channel again

"Wasn't that a bit close for comfort?"

"Not if you've sailed this course as often as I"

"You come this way often," he said. "I've wondered why you seldom take the river road"

Her eyes teased him, then returned sharply to her work They sailed for a moment in silence, with blue water under the catboat's keel and gulls quarreling above the seaweed that had already begun to show about them

"I've wondered too," she said, "why you ride so often on the river road I've seen you more than once in the early morning It can't always be a country call, can it?"

She asked the question with disarming innocence, though her eyes were twinkling. He spoke quickly, hoping to cover his panic with bluster. "If you're implying that I've a doxy in the piny woods——"

"I almost hoped you had It'd be refreshing to find you're human, after all"

"Is that why you brought me out today—to test my humanity?" Again he marveled at his aplomb, the urge to smash down that tiller, swaying like a high gate between them, and take her in his arms was unbearable

"Surely you must realize that the president of the Darby Company is far too busy for—love affairs"

"Then why does he ride out so often?"

"As it happens, he's also a busy doctor."

Nancy tossed her head and permitted herself a most unladylike squint at the sun and the wind gauge "At least you're gallant enough not to ask *your* question again"

"You mean—why you come and go so often in this catboat?"

"This is a racing cat, Toby. She has a coppered keel It draws all of four feet"

"Shall I go overside and shove?"

"If you like, but you'll be soaked to the waist."

"The sun's hot I'll dry soon enough."

He wondered if he should ask her to turn the other way and decided against such prudery as he tossed coat and shirt aside, rolled his loose drill trousers to the hip If this was indeed a game, she could play it to the end For the same reason he rested deliberately with his arms cradled on the gunwale when he had dropped overside After the first sharp tingle, the coolness of the river was delightful to his bare legs He waited for a moment, hoping she would make some move to reveal her purpose

"You're taking this well," he said.

"Why not, with a man aboard?"

"Surely I'm the last man you'd care to be stranded with"

"Your grammar is bad, Dr. Kent," she said "Dig in your toes and shove"

He smiled inwardly, sure that he understood her now, and waited, knee-deep in the river, until she rose and took the long, iron-tipped grains pole from its place beneath a gunwale. It was only when she stepped to the afterdeck that he noticed she had removed both shoes and stockings for better purchase on the catboat's planking

"Can you dig in, Toby, or is the bottom too muddy?"

"I haven't tried yet," he said

Nancy thrust the pole deep. "Of course, if you *want* to stay here until the ebb——"

He dropped breast-deep in the Savannah, letting his bare toes glide over the marl and weeds of the bottom until they found a spot to anchor Walking the length of the hull, he saw that it had risen slightly, now that it was relieved of his weight, though it was evident that the keel was still hard aground, he could hear the rhythmic slap of her bare soles on the deck, knew she had paralleled his move along the far gunwale "First, I'll rock her at the bowsprit"

She leaned above him, disturbingly near as her bare legs braced against the mainsail guy, and supplemented his effort with vigorous thrusts of the pole White marl clouded the water about him For an instant he thought he felt the hull give a little there in its sandy bed Leaning his shoulder against the joining of bowsprit and hull, he shoved with all his strength The catboat shivered, but remained fast.

"Is there any way we can lighten her?"

"Not unless you come overside too."

"Perhaps I'd better, at that"

"I was only joking, Nancy. *You'd* be wet to the chin"

"Not quite to the chin," she said. "You're only breast-deep, and I'm almost as tall."

He stared in frank disbelief as she brought the grains pole aboard, stepped back a pace to the partial shelter of the idly slatting jib, and unfastened her bodice. Apparently unconscious of his eyes, she dropped the calico dress from her shoulders and worked with busy fingers at the placket that held the waist As the lacings parted, she stepped out of the garment and tossed it across the boom The figured camisole beneath was quite as complete a covering as the ball gown she had worn at the Filature, but Toby felt his pulses race at the unlooked-for glimpse of shoulders there in the glare of day.

"Don't be startled," she said. "As you observe, I'm quite decent Even now," she added, and untied one of her petticoats, kicking it calmly into the cockpit as it dropped to the deck Try as he might, he could not keep his eyes from the sweet fluted roundness of her thighs. It was evident that she wore no stays this morning, her waist and firm young breasts needed no such molding.

"Stand back a bit, please I'm coming over"

Camisole and petticoats ballooned alarmingly as she slipped overside a scant yard from where he stood. Pretending to seek a fresh purchase on the hull, he managed to cover the worst of his confusion as she waded toward him, the Savannah almost to her chin

"Will you do your share, Toby, or shall we just swim awhile?"

"I'm ready when you are," he said quietly, and laid his shoulder hard against the hull, just under the curve of the bowsprit Nancy had already moved to a parallel position, with only the cutwater between them Instinctively he put a hand there to steady himself, and felt her fingers close above his own

"Together now," she said. "Count three—then give it all you have She's all but floating on her own."

"One—two—three—*heave-ho!*"

He felt her strength meet the hull, though he could see nothing of her now but the fingers twined in his They strained in unison at the opposite gunwales The catboat gave another languid shiver, and seemed to thrust back at them, as though she possessed a separate strength.

"Harder, Toby! She's giving"

His toes clawed bottom and held firm; his shoulders, cracking under the strain, matched Nancy's final heave Keel and bottom parted with that heroic shove—so rapidly, that they were both sent sprawling Blowing the water from his head as

he broke surface he saw that Nancy was swimming desperately after the saucy little vessel, which already threatened to escape with the tug of the tide.

"Climb aboard and steady her!" she cried "Hurry, please!"

He blessed the boyhood prowess that brought him abreast of the catboat in a dozen long strokes and the up-country strength that boosted him aboard He swung the vessel's nose into the tide with one touch of the tiller Nancy, still a good fifty feet astern, swam hard to reach the wake and the trailing painter. Busy with the antics of the mainsail, which had staged a revolt of its own in the wind, Toby let her act as a natural brake for a moment, confident that she could handle herself in deep water

"Easy does it I'll help you aboard"

"I can help myself, thank you"

But he had already lashed the tiller and spread-eagled on the after-deck, with the painter in both hands Still towing her behind the briskly-moving catboat, he drew in the line slowly, for all the world like a classic angler who has just hooked a mermaid. Then, with a final sharp tug, he brought her alongside, caught both her hands, and brought her inboard in one easy lift

Her eyes locked with his as she surged up from river to deck; the camisole gaped, and he had a torturing glimpse of hard pink nipples straining at brine-soaked fabric Then his arm was around her, steadying her as the catboat lurched

"Thank you, Toby. I shouldn't say it but—that was refreshing"

He didn't feel in the least refreshed as he watched her set the gaff wires, preparatory to raising the mainsail Burning to follow that natural embrace with another even more explicit, he forced himself to root at the tiller Under his hand the cat steadied against the increasing presure of the wind, and glided with the current to mid-channel

"Swing the boom," said Nancy "We can get the mainsail up between us From here on we'll sail a narrower triangle"

"No more shoals until Sangaree?"

Her lids fluttered He could not be sure if she was laughing —or searching his words for a hidden meaning "Do you think I planned to ground us just now?"

"You said you enjoyed it That's enough for me"

She seemed about to speak, then turned back to her work on the gaff Sensing his small victory, and unwilling to exploit it, he made sure of the tiller lashing, then hurried to help her Together at boom and gaff, they raised the mainsail and let the boom stream free with the wind at its peak The

catboat, sailing herself for the moment, seemed to find the channel by instinct.

"If you'll nurse that wind," said Nancy, "I'll dress behind the mainsail " She snatched dress and petticoat from the cockpit as she spoke He made no effort to detain her as she vanished behind the wide canvas triangle.

Watching her bare feet dance nimbly among the coiled ropes of the foredeck, he came back to realities in time to save the boat from a treacherous yaw as the wind veered suddenly. Anchored to the transom seat beside the tiller, forcing his mind away from that portion of the deck where she stood, he knew he had read her stratagem correctly, though refused to guess the outcome she desired

Riding as they were in midstream, with not even a cypress bateau in sight, she was as safe from observation now as she would have been in her room at Sangaree Safer still from *him,* he repeated savagely, whether she truly desired him, or was bent on teasing him anew . . . His eyes, conning the wind gauge on the forepeak, moved slyly down the mast, ignoring contrary orders from his brain The sail, dun-gray now that a cloud hid the sun, was protective as a tent wall save for the taut line of the boom, where perhaps six inches of Nancy's sleek white calves were plainly visible Even as he watched, a petticoat rustled to the deck, and she rose slightly on her toes, to step out of its damp circle Another followed, and her feet repeated their dancing pattern. There was a flash of pink, and she stepped out of what, he guessed, could have been nothing else but a pair of muslin drawers

He knew that she was all but naked now, and turning her body to the sun like an open flower as light streamed again from the blue His hand went rigid on the tiller as the sail changed color, too, under that hot golden light. Opaque no longer, the canvas gave her back to him in breath-taking silhouette, at the very moment when she drew the camisole over her head and stood unclothed as Eve, and just as unconcerned

Unaware of his devouring eyes—or was she really unaware?—Nancy stood poised for a long instant, like a statue in some Grecian garden He watched her hands caress her body's symmetry, saw them mold the long, heartbreaking beauty of her thighs, the high, trim buttocks, the flat planes of the abdomen He watched them move higher, to cup both breasts as the sun poured over her . . And then desire dissolved his brain in its own potent alembic He lurched forward soundlessly to bury his face between those two proud chalices

A whip lashed one cheek. He reeled under the impact, saving himself against the port gunwale. Stung by a treacherous gust, the catboat leaned crazily as the untended tiller banged against its housing. Toby, pinned between boom and hull, with his eyes blinded by the canvas of the mainsail, hardly heard the splash. The catboat righted miraculously, and his hand found the tiller again. The boom swung, revealing an empty foredeck. Nancy was swimming once again, already a good hundred feet astern—treading water gently after her first plunge, her hair spread like a red-gold shield on the river.

"What happened, Toby?"

There was no trace of alarm in her voice. To save him, he could not guess whether she had been angered by her sudden spill.

"Something snapped, I'm afraid." Something in *me*, he added silently. You may thank the wind—and your mainsail boom—for a narrow escape. If escape is what you wanted . . .

"Come about and pick me up. I'll never catch you now."

He watched his bare toes tangle in the stern-sheets, saw that they were bringing in the mainsail boom with no message from his brain. The wind had steadied now. It was a simple matter to bring the catboat about and tack toward the lone swimmer, already no more than a red dot on the river's immensity. Running sweetly down her port tack, the little vessel seemed to bridge the distance like a djinn's carpet. "Catch the painter as I go by," he shouted. "I'll look the other way."

"You can't, Toby. You'll run me down."

He saw the wisdom of that in time, and dared to roar by within a foot of her. The river, clear as sea water in this tidal stretch, revealed her whole body as completely as though she had been cased in jade. Until he died, he knew he would remember the way her red-gold hair spread in the tide, framing the long, silver-sweet lines of her beauty like a wide-open fan. The way her eyes dared him to find the power to turn aside, as she swam hard for the painter, and let herself lift in a smother of foam at the wake, bit by bit, until only her thrashing knees were submerged . . .

"Perhaps you'd best go back to your sailing, after all," she said. "It seems you need a bit of practice when you're close hauled."

He kept his eyes on the cutwater as she swarmed aboard and scampered forward. Knowing he was lost if he raised his head by a quarter inch, he sailed a course that a master mariner might envy—and tried in vain to shut his ears to

the feminine rustlings that drifted, with the booming wind, from behind the mainsail

"Wasn't that just a bit overdone, Toby?"

He tried hard to growl an answer, but no words came.

"Can you hear me, Toby?"

"Of course I can hear you."

"This is a truce, you know. Was it fair to drown me—without even a petticoat for a shroud?"

He realized, with a slight start, that he had been cursing beneath his breath for some moments now. Forcing the words a bit, he said gruffly, "Are you accusing me of spilling you?"

"Why not? You accused me of grounding us"

"If I take back that—that accusation, will you take back yours?"

"Wouldn't it be simpler if we took back nothing, and cried quits?"

"As you like," he said, and continued his inspection of the cutwater

"You may look now, Toby," she said

He lifted his eyes at last, surprised to find that she was already seated in the curve of the cockpit, hugging her knees, encased now in a decent volume of calico, and laughing at him through the red-gold skein of her hair.

"Where were we—when we ran aground?"

"Discussing the fact that you were human, I believe"

"So we were. I was rather angry too Remember why?"

"Possibly because I was so long in admitting it."

"Do you admit it now?"

"After the shoal, emphatically."

She moved forward on that and settled beside him on the transom seat, as naturally as though it had always been her place, and his "Shall I take the tiller now?"

"Certainly not After your slur on my seamanship, I'll warp us into your own dock"

She smiled at him "So you'd sail me up to Sangaree with your own hand? Perhaps I'm wrong, Toby. Perhaps you're human too"

Incredulously, he heard his own voice join in her laughter. And then desire swept him one more time in its searing wind. He could feel himself falling—toward her beckoning eyes, toward her impish laughter Falling—deep and lost and damned—into the golden cloud of her hair. . . His vision cleared in earnest as he lifted his eyes to the course ahead Sangaree Creek had begun to open under their bowsprit There, aloof as ever on its hill, the great white manor house stared down at him with its pride unshaken.

It was reminder enough of the gulf that lay between them, even though he could find no hint of that pride in Nancy Gregory's eyes when he dared to meet them again.

v

An hour later, pacing the downstairs library of the manor house, staring through the belvedere at the shimmer of the lawns, he was sure the gulf would never close. Sangaree had fulfilled his fears to the last suave line. Sangaree—and here he bowed his head to the inevitable—was Nancy's world in microcosm—a bastion he could never hope to conquer, though he had slipped through its gates for a day.

Walking up from the quay and through the formal rose garden had been like walking through a dream. The dream had persisted when he turned into this tall, book-paneled room to wait for Nancy to give orders to her slaves. Reality had descended, with its usual crushing burden, only during her long absence—when he had paced the room a score of times, and fidgeted at the belvedere, and cursed this muted magnificence beneath his breath. . . . Yes, the manor house of Sangaree was here to stay. War had bivouacked on its doorsill—it had emerged from the ordeal untouched. Its mistress was no less inviolate. He was sure of that intuition now, though he had held her in his arms a scant hour ago and seen her swim naked in the river. Today she might tease him into making love to her, to please her vanity. Tomorrow, when they met above the Darby ledgers, she would be herself again.

Or so he reasoned, as he flung himself into a chair, to stare again at the fruited-marble mantel and the portrait above it. Victor Darby, magnificent in plum-colored velvet, with one hand resting lightly on a spaniel's shoulder, smiled back at him from the frame. Gilbert Stuart himself had done that likeness, just before the Revolution. Hidden away for safekeeping, the canvas had resumed its place above the mantel only when Nancy's artisans had pronounced the restoration of Sangaree complete.

Today Toby fancied that Old Victor's smile was a trifle sad—that those fine, flashing eyes, looking down on the spectacle of man's greed, held a spark of pity for them all. . . . And yet it was Old Victor himself who had raised the rooftree of Sangaree. It was he who had insisted that the estate go to Nancy, to do with as she would. Surely the patriarch had realized that only a fortune could restore this house to its former splendor—that a far greater fortune would be needed to support it thereafter.

Again past and present joined He could see Victor Darby, on the eve of his departure for the wars, staring unhappily at the cosmos he had created, and the chatelaine who summed up its essence Loving his daughter as he did, the founder of the Darby Company had merely sought a compromise between romance and reality But Old Victor had never faced the fact that compromise, in his daughter's book, was a word without meaning

The certainty of the image brought Toby to his feet again He wandered across the peach-bloom carpet, to pause before a *secrétaire*, with a precise row of volumes in a leaded-glass shelf above For the second time in that hour his hand touched the key in the bookshelf lock. The glass pane swung back easily Even before he drew forth the last volume in that precisely ordered row he knew that he was holding a bound manuscript rather than a formal book Roy had spoken too often of his father's writings, and of their precise location in the library of Sangaree for Toby to need orientation now.

THE RANDOM PAPERS
OF
VICTOR DARBY, *Gent.*

He stared at the gilt title on the book's spine for a long time before he replaced it, unread Here perhaps was a key to much that had puzzled him during his year in Savannah Perhaps even an open sesame to the strange heart of Nancy Darby Gregory Old Victor had said that his protégé would find the answer to most problems at Sangaree, if he had the patience to read them aright Usually so clear in his pronouncements, the Founder of the Darby Company had taken that riddle to his grave . . *The Random Papers of Victor Darby, Gent* Roy had mentioned those calf-bound diaries the night his father died Was it possible that he had been lured to Sangaree, at long last, that he might read them? Had Nancy left him alone in this room for an idle hour, in the hope that he would be drawn to this bookshelf?

He abandoned the fancy promptly as he heard a step in the hall, and faced the door with a familiar tension at the base of his brain But it was Nancy's major-domo who bowed in the threshold—a proud white-haired Negro in canary-yellow livery with a long staff of office held gracefully in one brown hand

"The mistress awaits the doctor at the bateau landing. The mistress informs the doctor that there is still time to inspect the paddies before dinner"

There was no flourish in the words—only a natural dignity that went with the tall white room, with the dim richness of a thousand volumes, the marble miniatures of philosophers in every wall niche, with Victor Darby's sad, enigmatic smile. . . . Toby faced the portrait of his benefactor, as though waiting for one last order. Then he shrugged, and followed the Negro into the hall, where still older Darbies frowned down from every wall, where the spring noon, spilled in prodigally from twin fanlights, hung like a golden patina in the stillness

A quiet as absolute as the depths of some white-marble tomb A golden patina, giving that same white marble a warmth it had never really earned Perhaps that summed up Sangaree better than any curses whispered under a visitor's breath

Following the major-domo to the southern portico, Toby had glimpses of a gilded dining room spacious as the hall of some medieval king Of a great drawing room, shrouded to the last chandelier, and shuttered against the blazing morning Victor Darby had lived here once, he had raised a family here before he had deeded the house to Nancy. It was still impossible to believe that people had once laughed and lusted in these suave rooms, drunk deep at that monumental table, argued the verities in the sanctuary of that library.

"Have you served here long?"

Pausing just inside the portico, the major-domo seemed both startled and pleased that the visitor should address him directly

"I was houseboy for the old master, sir, before Sangaree had a roof And I served Miss Nancy's father from the beginning " The Negro's English, Toby noted, was flawless as his manners

"Why have I never seen you in Savannah?"

"No one but I could remember Sangaree Not even Miss Nancy—she had been too long in Nassau with her husband It has taken all my time to help the builders restore this house to—to what it was "

"What's your name?"

"I'm Miss Nancy's Rex, Doctor "

Miss Nancy's Rex A simple factual statement, with no overtone of pathos Miss Nancy's field mules, reflected Toby, or the gelding she used to ride into Savannah, could hardly have accepted bondage more naturally Yet Rex belonged to his setting in a way no freedman could belong What would the Rexes of this Southern world—kings only in their naming —do with so strange a thing as freedom?

Toby shook off the question angrily. The aura of Sangaree, he perceived, was already potent.

"If the doctor will be good enough to follow me——"

Prepared though he was for the view from the south portico, Toby found that he could still gasp at the sheer green sweep. Boxed at the horizon by windbreaks of pine, misted by the blue of winding tidal river, Sangaree plantation seemed all but endless, there in the sunny noon. The rice fields did much to create that illusion, with their massed checkerboard pattern of dikes and canals From where he stood, Toby could hardly note that much of this vast acreage had gone back to sawgrass, thanks to the neglect of the war years—though he knew, from his own books, that barely three hundred acres were fit for this spring's sowing The aprons of lawn and formal gardens, of quarters and work sheds, of carriage and coachhouse—endless in themselves, as glimpsed from the summit of this man-made hill—were real enough.

He stood silent for a long moment, bracing against the impact of this self-contained empire, this world that Pagnol's wealth and Nancy's pride had re-created Then, without pausing to yearn for a vanished idyll—or to recall the flash of white limbs in the shadow of a catboat's sail—he walked out to join the mistress of Sangaree

A pergola, flaming with jasmine, half-circled the southern lawn. It gave, in turn, to a long flight of steps that dropped in a series of urn-bordered levels to the water's edge As he followed Rex's nimble lead, Toby could see the pattern of the grounds take form below—the last sweep of lawn, bisected by the avenue of live oaks that made its own wide curve about the northern wing of the house, to join the outer gateposts There was the shell road that led across the last of the Darby farmlands There was the wide white circle where it met the river road at the junction of a small bridge, which also marked the terminus of Sangaree Creek

Plunging deeper in familiar dream pictures with each step, he paused in the shade of a great boxwood before he made the next turning From this point on the path was as familiar as the palm of his hand, he had followed it too often, in his mind's eye, in those hopeless vigils across the creek A narrow ramp, between the outbuildings; a last steep flight of steps where the fieldstone shoring of the hill joined the waters of the creek itself Here was the landing and the tin-roofed shed that served as a berth for the catboat Here, waiting serenely under a lace-bordered sunshade, was Nancy herself—a queen who commanded all she surveyed Her empire, at the moment, included the bobbing heads of the half-dozen blacks swarming to take her orders, and the

bateau that had just swum away from a flock of its fellows, to nose into the landing

Like her parasol, she was all in white lace now, her copper hair twisted in a *couronne* braid, her lips just escaping a smile as she saw him pause, there in the shadow of the landing shed And, like the queen he imagined her, she dismissed her dark retainers with a flourish of her parasol and came forward with an extended hand

He kissed it sullenly, with what he hoped was a fair imitation of Pagnol's grace

"And what shall we visit first, Doctor? The paddies themselves, or the threshing floor?"

Her manner, for the moment, was as cool as the hand he still held within his own He stepped back awkwardly, shocked by the physical rebuff, though he had foreseen it clearly while he waited in the library.

"The threshing floor, Mrs. Gregory? I understood this was sowing time."

"We use the floors for that process too In fact, that's the only excuse for my delay—I was inspecting seed"

A likely story, he fumed silently it took you an hour at least to dry your hair To say nothing of twining that intolerably exciting body of yours in those yards of Irish lace

Aloud he said only, "You're in charge of my tour today. Remember, I'm only a visiting critic"

"I'm also remembering that Darby money paid for that rice"

He found that he could grin after all as he recalled how glibly she had asked for a mortgage on Sangaree, to permit her to plant a quarter section for her own profit outside the ubiquitous company ledgers It was not the first hard money she had received from the Darby coffers, for similar ventures in and around Sangaree

"The Darby money could hardly be in safer hands."

"Come to the threshing shed just the same After all, your rice will be planted exactly as mine"

"*Our* rice, Mrs Gregory. We share and share alike outside this magic circle"

"True enough—when there's something to share"

She put that same cool hand on his arm before he could speak, and permitted him to help her down to the wide stern seat of the bateau The square-shouldered Negro at the pole, a black Hercules, naked save for glaring white smallclothes, clicked bare heels smartly as Nancy lifted her parasol. Settling beside her as the bateau swam gently into open water, Toby found that there was shade enough for two, after all, under that lacy circle.

"Disappointed, Doctor?" Her voice was no less cool, though she spoke in a whisper, in the gloom of a shared parasol

"In Sangaree—or in you?"

"Aren't we inseparable in your mind?"

"Not always," he said

For the moment his eyes were hard on hers For that moment he was certain that he was her master. Then Nancy gave a light laugh, and took back her queenship, unruffled.

"Observe the rice birds, Doctor They're on time this year, as always"

He looked up in time to note a sudden dark whir of wings against the sun and a cawing that seemed to vanish into the blue along with the rush of pinions With that turning, he could feel Nancy take back her impersonal role of guide as casually as though she had clamped an iron ring about his throat

"Observe, too, that our watchers are at their posts"

He waved with her at the crowd of animated scarecrows crowding the first dike that hemmed the flooded field beyond The slaves shouted a polyglot greeting. Nancy lifted her parasol to receive the homage as the bateau skimmed within a few feet of the retaining wall. Calling to most of the Negroes by name, she seemed genuinely pleased at the encounter

"There's nothing they like more than to dress in bandannas and play scarecrow In the old days we couldn't keep seed in the earth without them. Even so, the birds would come back after sundown and do their share of damage This year, I hope, we'll be able to turn those hands into the fields"

"So you're claying the rice?"

She looked at him with wide-open eyes "Since when did you hear of claying?"

"From a report you left on my desk only last week"

"Then my little surprise is spoiled" She spoke over one shoulder to the boatman "Never mind, Priam Follow the east canal, the doctor must see our threshing floor in action."

The bateau moved briskly as it turned the corner of the dike, leaving Sangaree Creek for a kind of tidal canal Raising a bit on one elbow, Toby found he could look down into the paddies—most of them still dry, thanks to the containing walls, a few already flooded with a film of water so thin that black earth could be clearly seen beneath

"Clean pickings for the birds under the old regime," said Nancy "The rice used to float long before it sprouted Often we'd lose in a heavy tide what the birds left When it's clayed,

it's anchored And the birds, praise Heaven, are too stupid to find it."

The boat glided opposite the threshing floor as she spoke—a wide, stilted surface in the heart of the paddies, with a straked palmetto roof to keep off the rain At first glance Toby was positive that an old-fashioned hoedown was in progress, there in the blond shade of the palmetto fronds. Then he saw that what he had taken for dancers was merely another ordered crowd of slaves, shuffling barefoot over a thin layer of rice blended with quantities of reddish Georgia clay As they moved, the Negroes' toes, alive with ancient rhythms, even in this plebian task, mixed clay and rice into a thousand tiny balls, and moved down the floor to repeat the process in another area.

Younger slaves of both sexes, each dragging a crokersack from a strong brown shoulder, moved in the wake of the dancers to sweep up the seedlings As the sacks filled, they were piled aboard a series of bateaux, moored along the open sides of the threshing barn "That seed won't be used till tomorrow," said Nancy. "However, I believe they're sowing the south hundred now Am I right, Priam?"

"Right, Miz Nancy."

"Follow the canal, then, and cut into the fields at the next turn"

The bateau moved into the sluggish stream, taking the long curve with all the ease of a skimming pelican that trusts its wings Nancy furled her parasol and stood up just as they were about to turn into the first tributary canal. When she spoke, her voice had the crisp fluency that Toby remembered so well.

"Observe the trunk, Doctor—and the trunk minder It'll give you an excellent notion of how these fields are flooded, at any depth we wish"

Her voice was impersonal as a teacher's, lecturing an indifferent pupil, so was the hand she offered to steady him as he rose beside her to examine the water lock in the dike. Standing thus, they could look down into the flat, artificial basin of the rice paddy, and appraise the depth of the water film that was seeping over its level surface Despite the murkiness of the water beneath the high dirt bank, Toby could make out the contours of the "trunk"—a long cypress conduit, closed at each end by a trapdoor which controlled the flow from canal to field The trunk minder, a sharp-eyed Negro seated in a kind of sentry box atop the dike, held the trapdoor ropes in both fists, while he studied the slowly rising level in the field beyond

"As you'll observe, Doctor," said Nancy, "rice must

sprout under water—and do most of its growing in that same state Each paddy must be flooded several times between seedtime and harvest For that final operation, however, the paddies must be dry"

"So you plant beside a tidal river?"

"It's simpler than terracing, and much less expensive Even if these retaining walls were leveled by a hurricane, they could be shored up in time for the next crop" She paused to speak to the trunk minder, who lifted his traps even higher, permitting the brackish water to gush across the paddy in greater volume Watching her issue the soft-voiced order, Toby marveled again at her ease in combining lace with command—and a knowledge that went beyond the earthy skill of her own overseers

"Surely these tide gates aren't easy to replace"

"Go back to your history, Doctor You'll find the Egyptians used a similar water gate on the Nile Here, it's merely a question of watching your almanac for the tides To flood, we take advantage of high water and close it in, to drain, we make sure that the gates are open at the ebb. The tug of the moon does the rest"

The smooth voice continued, picturing the first plumping of the rice seed, the first green stirring She spoke well with the authority of experience behind her words He could hardly doubt that she, too, had sat in that wooden sentry box to watch the fields in flood—or waded, in a man's hip boots, among the first tender stalks Or stood on this same dike, when the plants were in bloom, and this whole vast water-film was starred with their tender blue flowers .

"Once the rice is in bloom, we put in what we call the harvest flow As you can see, Doctor, the trunks control the level to the inch Here in tidewater we call that drawing a bead—that is, holding the level just under the flower, where the grain will form When the grain has fully developed, we take off the water entirely, and send in our cutters Then the canals are useful once again, to ferry the crop to the threshing floor."

"Shall we go on to watch the sowing?"

"If you like" Her eyes were veiled again. "Have I bored you with my little lecture?"

"On the contrary"

"I'm considered a good planter on this coast My father said as much often"

"He's said it in my hearing, Mrs Gregory. May I endorse his judgment?"

She accepted the compliment with a grave inclination, and signaled again to the boatman Skimming across the sur-

face of a deep-flooded paddy, they grounded gently beside another deep-diked field This time they were able to watch in comfort from the cross seat of the bateau, like spectators on a watery balcony

The field below the dike, relatively dry and furrowed with geometrical exactness, lay fallow under the spring sunshine Working by furrows, a large group of slaves was sowing clayed rice from crokersacks Moving with rhythmic grace, the gaily-clad sowers made a bright picture against the black oozing earth of the rice field Toby saw that each slave was a specialist in his line· spreading the seed with a forward flourish of the arm, and spreading it with surprising evenness which assured a uniform growth of the seedlings when the area was flooded.

"Is the process complete, Doctor?"

"Quite complete," he murmured, and hoped he had matched her in coolness "Not that I needed the demonstration In fact, I'd have accepted your report, sight unseen"

The bateau skimmed toward the main canal. Already, Toby noted, there was a hint of coolness in the air, now that the sun had begun to wester, though the paddies still gleamed like dark mirrors Or was it only the wall that rose between them now—no less tangible, though their bodies brushed on the narrow cross seat?

"I'm glad you approve, Doctor. If I told you how glad, you might accuse me of——"

"Hyperbole, perhaps?"

"I wanted you to see how this white gold was raised, with your own eyes" Again she hesitated a fraction before she continued "Most of all, I suppose, I wanted you to tell me that I had the right to manage Sangaree as I saw fit"

"Sangaree will always be yours, Mrs Gregory—so long as you can afford it"

Nancy ignored that impertinence easily enough "You still haven't said that you approve"

"I've always approved of you as an estate manager"

"That's an evasion too We've over eight hundred slaves in these paddies, one hundred of them are mine. The rest are the property of the company. All of them live in quarters under the hill"

"I've observed the quarters," he said

"Can you deny they're the best you've ever seen? Would those slaves live half so well if they were free?"

"Naturally not—today Or even day after tomorrow"

"Do more than a few understand what freedom means?"

"Again I concur, Mrs Gregory."

"You've admitted that I care for my own as well as any

planter. You know that manumission, except for a favored few, is only a dream in our time. And you've said that I can raise rice and show a profit."

"Are you suggesting that I turn over the crop to you?"

"The entire crop, Doctor. And the bateau. The control of all Darby overseers—and the Darby Company's slaves."

Grasping the full significance of his visit here, Toby swallowed hard. "In other words, you're suggesting that I abdicate in your favor?"

"Only so far as this crop is concerned The crop itself, of course, is still the company's property—to be sold as its president wishes."

"But you'd manage the company's rice fields until the crop was in—and its workers—and its machinery?"

Nancy lowered her lashes there in the dappled shade of her parasol. "Could you manage them better, Doctor?"

He sought refuge from that direct thrust. "Your proposal is something of a shock to me"

"I understand that Men are usually shocked when they find that women can do their work."

"I'd have to think it over"

"Naturally. Will you do your thinking in Father's library, while I change for dinner?"

"Again the library, Mrs. Gregory?"

"Why not? Men think best when they're surrounded by books."

"Especially your father's books?" He regretted the question instantly as he saw her eyes cloud "Roy told me about his diaries," he explained hesitantly "I only thought——"

"My father was a great man," said Nancy. "Even though he was a hopeless idealist Probably I've done wrong to keep his—his papers here at Sangaree He'd always hoped to publish the best of them"

"And you hoped I'd look at those diaries today without being prompted. Is that what we're talking around?"

"That's my precise meaning, Doctor" To his amazement, he saw that she had blushed scarlet with that soft-voiced admission "You could do worse than to glance at them"

"Will they help me to make up my mind about the rice crop?'

"They'll help you to decide many things" The blush had deepened now, from the roots of her copper hair to the demure V of her bodice "I could even recommend a specific volume—if you're really interested"

"I'm deeply interested in any of Victor Darby's thoughts"

Her eyes were straight ahead now, he could feel her whole body go taut on the narrow cross seat of the bateau

"I've always found the final volume most to the point. It contains his—shall I say his prescriptions for the future?"

"All his prescriptions were for the future," said Toby. "Never for the past."

"I feel that these will interest you particularly. Now may we talk of other things?"

Her hand lay on the seat beside him, curled into a tight fist Obeying an impulse he could not name, he took it gently between his own and uncurled the taut fingers one by one. She made no effort to withdraw as he kissed the hot palm.

"To the mistress of Sangaree," he said. "How often must I repeat that she's worthy of the title?"

She had asked that they speak of other things. But there seemed no need of words now as they glided into the creek again and swung south for the landing Her eyes were still veiled, and her cheeks still glowed, but she seemed oddly relaxed, now that she had spoken her mind Even the small, hot hand that lay within his own was an unspoken promise.

vi

When she had left him at the library door, when Rex the major-domo, hovering in the background like a discreet ghost, had drawn the mahogany panels shut, Toby paced for a long time without even glancing at the book-lined walls Or the leaded-glass shelf above the secrétaire that might hold the key to his destiny.

Old Victor had issued other orders—and he had obeyed. It would be a grim joke if that same benefactor, reaching beyond the grave, had written down his last command and filed it between those rich vellum covers Toby could not believe that his life and Nancy's would arrange themselves so neatly. . . . Or that he could cross the gulf that divided them on a bridge of books

Be that as it may, he told himself, I'll postpone the miracle for a moment more. For the present, *it's far more important* to remember the hot, moist pressure of her hand in mine —and that note of pleading in her voice and eyes. The way her hair gleamed there in the dim sunlight of the hall The way the breath caught in her throat as she spoke from the stair.

"And now you've seen all of Sangaree, is it worth the cost?"

"Sangaree is a thing of beauty, like its owner To my eyes, it's still an empty shell"

"All houses are until they're lived in awhile This house is waiting"

"Waiting, Mrs Gregory?"

"For its owner to find herself a husband, Doctor. Now you have it all"

He remembered how quickly she had left him then—as though the direct statement had frightened her a little. And how his own breath had caught as he dared to read his own meaning into her words . .

With no sense of transition he was at the secrétaire, fumbling with the key in the scrolled brass lock The final volume in the file was already in his hand before the paper fluttered to the desk top. Oddly enough, it was the same volume he had all but opened earlier that day—and returned to the shelf unread He found he was duplicating that same movement now as his whole being concentrated on the square of note paper lying open on the desk

He had not noticed the letter on his first visit to the bookshelf, though it might well have been hidden among those suave bindings There was no mistaking the handwriting, or the meaning of the spider-legged sentences that sprawled so boldly across the page.

> MIGNONNE·
> Mauvaise veine! Le prix de nos coeurs m'a echappé J'attendrai de nouveau le depart de M le capitaine B Il faut absolument savoir l'heure précise de ces departs en pleine mer, le D B est toujours le maître La prochaine fois, fais ton avis sur-le-champ Même messager, même rendezvous Je te salue, mon âme
>
> F.

He reeled under the impact, as though each word was a separate hammer, punishing his brain, and, even as he staggered under its full import, his shaking fingers replaced the note, precisely as he had found it, on the shelf In the same instinctive motion he returned the final volume of Victor Darby's memoirs to its place The Founder's wisdom would be a pale anticlimax to this discovery.

So Martha had been right, after all

He could read the whole pattern of Nancy Gregory's plotting in that note as clearly as though he had stolen down river to uncover the freebooters' hiding place Last night those gentlemen of the coast had waited to pounce on the *Darby Belle,* like so many patient vultures slipping her cable in deep darkness, the *Darby Belle,* with *le capitaine B* on her quarter deck, had gained the open sea in safety—where, as the same Captain Bronson had said, he was any vessel's master

Pagnol, planning his piracy in harmony with Nancy, had obviously been repaid, with interest, for the sums he had advanced to rebuild her private empire Working as she did in

the Darby depot, it had been easy for Nancy to inform the Frenchman and the Frenchman's coasters of the precise sailing dates of Darby vessels The fact that the Darby Company might be bled white in the process, the fact that blood had been spilled in the creeks below Savannah, mattered little to that Suave Frenchman—or to the mistress of Sangaree.

Other facts seemed crystal clear from one brief glance at the note. The messenger referred to could be only a trusted servant from the manor house itself. The rendezvous, just as obviously, was a spot down river, which Nancy, or Nancy's courier, could visit in the catboat. The fact that the note was hidden here, among the Founder's diaries, probably in the same spot as other communiqués, was only a final irony. Nancy, who could plot so ruthlessly on other fronts, had simply forgotten that one essential detail . . . Or so he reasoned now, as he prowled the library and cursed her, and all her works, in a soundless whisper

As plotting went, hers had the virtue of simplicity. She had fought him within the company, rather than without, the very prosperity of the Darby ventures had been calculated to fill the Frenchman's coffers—and her own. Had the *Darby Belle* been taken last night, in a blind skirmish, among the marshes of the tidal reach, the loss would have been irreparable. Thanks to her position in the offices, she could hope for as much, on the vessel's later voyages . . . In the meantime, if he surrendered control of the rice planting, she could easily bring ruin to a crop and attain the same ends With all of Sangaree delivered into her hands, and the company decently bankrupt, she could marry Pagnol, young Bristol—whomever she chose Or so his tortured mind insisted, as he paced one more time to the great show window of the library and stared down at the rich earth that seemed already in her grasp.

Should he confront her with the evidence and smash her on the spot? Fighting down that temptation, he regained some measure of calm. Now, as never before, it behooved him to play a waiting game—until he obtained proof positive for her conviction. Or until he made up his mind, once and for all, to kill Felix Pagnol.

So much was evident, on the surface Beneath, where he would go on nursing his hate and his hurt pride until doomsday, he could feel the urge toward a subtler revenge—a core of purpose as tangible as a mandrake's bitter heart . . . Thanks to that purpose, he was all but calm again when the hall panels opened at last and Nancy stood on the threshold.

Even in this moment—when he both renounced and damned her—Nancy's beauty took his breath away. Cased

in a calyx of white satin, laced in tight whalebone that accented her ripe young curves, her body seemed to glow with a promise all its own. Her face, framed in that same proud couronne braid, had never seemed sweeter, never more beguiling He tore his eyes away from the mute appeal of those full, half-parted lips, and fastened, instead, on the faint foam of lace that only half-masked the deep cut of her bodice His fingers curled, aching to fasten there and strip her naked for another, more ancient revenge At this moment he could have taken her with gusto, there on the cushions of an ottoman, with her father looking down from the mantel

When Nancy spoke at last, her voice had a strange, far-off timbre "You've a solemn look, Toby Have you been—meditating?"

"Deeply enough "

"Over my father's memoirs, I hope?"

"No, Nancy Somehow I wasn't in the mood for memoirs."

Her eyes darted to the secrétaire and the key thrust deep in the scrolled lock of the bookcase above it So far, she had not budged from the doorframe As she spoke again, she came into the room and pulled the panels shut behind her—still drifting rather than walking, a girl bewitched

"It would have helped if you'd read that last volume "

"Who would it have helped—you, or me?"

"Both of us, perhaps " She leaned against the ottoman as she spoke, to his amazement, he saw that she was trembling a little and struggling to conceal her agitation He wondered if she had just remembered that Pagnol's notes were sometimes concealed on the bookshelf—and killed the impulse to confront her with that bit of evidence For the present, he knew, it would be far simpler to play the game her way.

"I've said I wasn't in the mood for reading I was put off by something you said Just before you left me here "

Her lips struggled with a smile "Surely you know better than to quote a woman to her face "

"This, as it happens, was a factual statement Something about Sangaree——"

"I remember now I said it was only a frame—waiting for a marriage to—to bring it alive again "

"Precisely "

"How can you quarrel with that? Surely you'll admit that marriage is woman's only solution—in this century, at least "

"I was puzzled at your choice Since you've parted company with young Bristol, I can only assume that Pagnol is the lucky man "

Nancy took the frontal assault without a flicker. "You mean—because he's helped me to restore the estate?"

"Isn't it reason enough—when we add the man's natural endowments?"

"Will you believe me when I say that Felix Pagnol has no designs on my person whatever—or my land?"

"Only if you insist," he said, and smiled inwardly as she all but snatched her eyes away.

"So you'll join with all Savannah You *do* think he's my lover today—and may become my husband tomorrow?"

"If I'm in error, I'm eager for the facts."

"The facts, as usual, are so simple that no one will believe them During the Revolution, Felix was privateering out of Havana. My father advanced him a considerable sum, for friendship's sake This is merely his way of repaying it" Her gesture took in the whole rich room and the house beyond it "He believes in beauty, for its own sake Thanks to him. Sangaree is beautiful again He wishes no other reward"

"You're quite right, Nancy That is a bit hard to believe"

"Would you care to see Felix's note to Father? I've kept it among his papers"

"I prefer the story from your own lips Won't you finish it?"

"You've most of it now Exposing myself to gossip is a small price to pay, since it meant restoring Sangaree My final step is to secure the land for all time." Again her trembling lips just escaped smiling "In the meantime, of course, I must pray that the Darby Company fails."

"You've done no more than pray?"

"That's an unfair taunt, and you know it. I've done all I could for you—here, in Savannah, at Darbyville"

"Consider the taunt withdrawn, Nancy."

"I'll go on helping you, until your time is up And I'll go on praying that your good luck turns"

"And if I prove stronger than your—your prayers?"

"Then I'll yield to Father's wishes, and marry you" Her voice was only a vibrant whisper now, but he heard the words clearly "If you—want me in that way, Toby Kent"

"You'd sink that low, to make sure of Sangaree?"

"Haven't you called yourself enough harsh names, in your heart?" Her voice, taut as a throbbing fiddlestring, seemed ready to snap with each word "Why must you be an up-country mule to the end? *Why, in Heaven's name, couldn't you read Father's last diary?*"

"You mean he put that—that wish in writing?"

"It was his wish, when he sent you and Roy to Edinburgh Naturally he gave it up when I married George Gregory. He

—revived it, more than once, when he heard I was widowed." She was laughing wildly now, though her cheeks were wet with tears. "Look at me, Toby Kent. Can you see *now* why I couldn't accept you sight unseen?"

"But you'd accept me today."

"If the company prospers," she said. "If you really want me."

"You're asking me to believe that Victor Darby would sanction such a bargain?"

"Have it in his own words, if you insist——"

He stopped her as her fingers closed on the key to the bookshelf—stopped her brutally, with a hand hard on each of her white shoulders. "Let's say he expressed such a wish. Let's say that he—repeated it in his last years on earth. Has it occurred to you that I might have other plans?"

"Of course."

"Your father used me as an instrument for social justice—and I submitted. You'd use me as an instrument to keep your land, and gobble more. What if I told you I'd had enough of both, and meant to go West tomorrow? If I promised to dissolve the company in your favor, would you grant me a more temporary reward?"

His arms were about her at last, his fist clenched in the fabric of her gown. "Shall I try you now, Nancy, to see if you're in earnest? To learn how far you'd go to keep your precious land?"

She did not resist as his mouth crushed down on hers, though her lips were lax at first against his kiss. Then, incredulously, he felt her mouth open sweetly to mingle with his own, felt her hands and arms move—with the same undreamed-of-surrender—to draw him even closer. With that yielding, he knew that he would love her beyond the grave, no matter how deeply she betrayed him. And with that knowledge sifting like ashes through his brain, he flung her backward among the deep cushions of the ottoman.

"Sorry, Nancy Darby. It's quite useless to—tempt me." He found the words, after a fashion, though his voice was still hoarse with desire. "You see, we're still enemies. I'm afraid we'll always be."

With that final falsehood he discovered the strength to reel from library to portico, with her sobbing like music in his ears—a mocking music that would torture him in sleepless midnights to come. He never remembered crossing lawn and garden, or stumbling down the long flight of steps to the boat landing. When his brain cleared at last, he was in Nancy's catboat, tacking wildly toward the mouth of Sangaree Creek, as though the devil and all his angels pursued

FIVE • THE DARBY BELLE

OPERATING since noon, and grateful for the release it gave, he stepped away from the table a moment as their last case came in. A whiff of raw November air entered with the patient, and the light danced drunkenly above the clean-scrubbed table, he heard a shutter bang, far down the clinic corridor, before the door closed the operating theater into its own taut silence.

It was good to work indoors today, to close one's mind away from the world. Good to know that their little hospital was snug against this autumn gale, and that the score in today's battle with death was dintinctly in the doctors' favor. While all Savannah huddled indoors, warming its hands above pine-knot fires, it was quite in character for the mad president of the Darby Company to work by candlelight, in the gray half-darkness of noon. Quite proper that he should focus all his thoughts on the writhing black colossus pinioned to the table, and put aside the problems that awaited him on the threshold of the operating room.

"Whose Negro is this—one of ours?"

"It's Priam, sir. Mrs Gregory's boatman, from Sangaree."

Toby smiled across the table at his earnest young assistant. Dr Walter Appleby had come down from Augusta a good eight weeks ago, to serve the clinic as a full-time resident. It was still hard to remember that Roy Darby had been in London since August, pursuing yet another degree at the university. Walter had fitted his post admirably from the first day, and there would be more than enough work in the surgery alone to keep him there when Roy returned. But Toby could not help missing Roy at a time like this. His mind slid back painfully to the world beyond this candle-lighted sanctuary of science even as his testing fingers outlined the incision he must make, if Priam was to return to Sangaree alive.

"When did Mrs Gregory bring him in, Walter?"

"Day before yesterday, Dr Kent." Appleby's deep-tanned forehead creased in a puzzled frown. "You remember our treatments, don't you?"

"Perfectly. Massage, compresses—and, finally, a plaister. As you see, the swelling and the inflammation have persisted." Toby's fingers continued to outline the great, straining bulge just above the Negro's groin. A textbook case of strangulated hernia, it could now be relieved only by the knife. It was ironic, he thought, that his last case of the afternoon should be a slave from Nancy's own plantation. Day before yesterday he had almost refused to admit Priam —as he had, on occasion, turned away the cases of other neighboring planters—on the plea that the hospital was full to overflowing. The mistress of Sangaree, he had stormed silently, could afford to buy her own medical care . . .

He consigned the mistress of Sangaree to a temporary limbo, and bent once again above the table. If he moved with his usual speed, and kept his hands fluent, he could probably return a live slave to the manor-house doorstep. Nancy Gregory herself—and the insoluble problem she held poised above him—could be faced later—when he moved reluctantly from the world of science to the world of men.

"You administered an opiate, Walter?"

"Enough to keep him quiet—if we work fast."

"We'll incise the skin and see what we have."

The scalpel moved as he spoke, slashing out a three-inch incision above the groin. The tissue below, bulging under the pressure of unnaturally looped intestines, seemed ready to gape apart. Yet he saw instantly that those same cramped muscles would hold the bowel loop prisoner indefinitely.

"You're going in, Dr. Kent?"

"I've no choice."

Separating fat and skin with his fingers, there was little of the former on the Negro's board-rigid muscles, Toby cut gingerly into the deeper layers. Working blindly, he could not be sure where fascia ended and prisoned bowel began, one false move here, no matter how slight, would spell disaster—spilling the poisonous intestinal content into the patient's body, killing him as effectively as a knife thrust to the heart. He heard his assistant sigh out his relief when a pearly-white sheath appeared in the depths of the wound, the fiber-like layer called the aponeurosis. He had dissected this tissue often enough in cadavers, where the whole structure had been relaxed. Here, thanks to the profound tension beneath, the live tissue was adherent, making proper evaluation of the layers a matter of guesswork.

"The obstruction seems to be at the rings."

Young Dr. Appleby nodded. Both of them knew that the next stroke of the steel would be decisive. Toby reversed the knife, with the blade firm in his palm. At the edge of

the fiber layer he managed to lever the thin metal handle beneath the tissues, until he had raised up a narrow shelf. Upon this he cut swiftly, protecting the deeper layers by means of the handle of the instrument. As the tissues parted, the handle moved deeper, the knife grew bolder as the pearly-white fibers gaped, relieving some of the pressure that threatened the life of the incarcerated bowel

"Anchor him firmly, now. I'll try to deliver the obstruction"

Priam had emitted just one banshee wail—when the knife made its initial stroke He was writhing in earnest now. As Billy and another Negro intern spread-eagled him on the table, Sangaree's prize boatman seemed about to rise from his coma. Toby stood back without protest as Billy's fist, striking downward like a disciplined hammer, connected neatly with the base of the patient's skull They had used that trick often enough in the war, to bridge the time lag between a diminishing opiate and an operation's climax.

"We'll proceed, Dr. Appleby. Spread the wound a bit, if you please"

Now, at last, he could discern the focal point of his attack, a second layer of muscle, running in a slightly different direction, and nearly as tense, thanks to the swell of the actual hernia just beneath The knife moved on, much more fluently, now that the operative area was firmly defined, though both surgeons were already aware that their real risks were still ahead

"Is the internal ring obstructed, Doctor?"

Toby nodded and withdrew his hand from the wound for an instant, to give his junior an unobstructed view Now that the fascia had been laid back to expose the peritoneum, the difficulty was clear enough A metal blade, spoon-shaped and blunt, came into Toby's hand, he passed it beneath the muscle edges, and motioned to Appleby to apply pressure As the muscle moved out of the way, they could discern the constricting area, high up beneath the fascia itself. Pressing gently in turn, with all ten fingers deep in the wound, Toby could feel no change in that bowel-filled sac, no reassuring movement toward the abdominal cavity.

"I'll have to slit the ring, I'm afraid"

The scalpel, gliding down his palm, had already nicked the tight, glistening peritoneum layer As it parted, the actual intestinal wall was delivered to view at last Noting its dusky hue, he realized that he had operated at the last possible moment, in another few hours that unhealthy darkness would have turned to a deep, sick blue, the fatal harbinger of a bowel damaged beyond repair

Appleby spoke in a hoarse whisper. "How can you deliver without incising the bowel itself?"

"It's a simple enough risk, if you care to take it."

The room was quiet as the scalpel moved on, tight against the surgeon's index finger. Thrusting forward smoothly, steel and flesh entered the gaping aperture in the peritoneum, the blade, slitting as it moved, was in absolute control, as though the finger possessed a separate cutting edge. As he approached the neck of the sac, Toby could feel the tension build to the bursting point. Then, in a twinkling, the obstruction seemed to vanish under his insistent probing—and the finger, free of the scalpel blade, slid easily into the cavity of the abdomen itself.

"I've cut the ring," he said quietly. "The sac should reduce easily now."

"Apparently it's relaxing of its own accord," murmured Appleby, with something like awe in his tone

Toby stepped back from the table with an inward smile. As miracles went, this one had been strictly a minor affair, yet he could remember when he, too, had gaped at the miracles of old Dr Cagle, in that far-from-spotless consulting room in Augusta Or at the real magic of John Hunter's hands, in the stinking, smoky amphitheater at Edinburgh It was reassuring to feel this boy's eager hands move into the wound beside his own, to help in working the endangered loops of intestine back to their proper sector Heartening to realize that this was a continuity certain to endure beyond his time

"You may close the sac if you like, Dr. Appleby."

The boy flushed with pleasure as the senior surgeon moved away from the table. Watching him put in the sutures as he scrubbed at the side table, Toby saw that his assistant's hands were fluent as well as sound the purse-string cloture that he was placing at the neck of the sac was precise as a demonstrated equation in geometry.

"What comes next?"

"You've done more than your share today, Dr. Kent This was really the last case"

"Nothing to check in the wards?"

"Nothing your own nurses can't handle, sir I know you're anxious to get back to the depot."

"True I've the *Darby Belle's* manifest to check before dark"

And a suspicion that's eaten too long at my brain, he added silently, drying his hands and slipping into the dark broadcloth coat that had arrived aboard that same Darby flagship, on her last voyage from London . . He stared at

his image briefly in the small mirror above the washbasin and wondered if the hard lines about his mouth were etched there for all time

It was something to know that his doubts would be resolved tonight, after months of waiting He could only pray that Nancy Darby Gregory would be cleared by his stratagem once and for all The life he had just saved, here in his own surgery, had been easily salvaged. The canker at his own heart cried for sharper steel.

ii

Rain hissed against his cheek as he paused on the hospital porch and stared down into the harbor. the rain fell in a white curtain along the channel line, reducing the long file of merchantmen to ghost ships, twining the flats of Hutchinson's Island in a wet winding sheet Down river, the channel was dreary with fog wisps and empty as the day the first cautious explorer dropped anchor under Yamacraw Bluff. Sangaree, reflected Toby, would be deep in mist this afternoon, its proud white walls would stream with dampness, as freely as any pioneer's cabin He wondered briefly if Nancy was lonely, surrounded by that chill magnificence . . . And then he remembered that Nancy had ridden into town only that morning—to ask after Priam's health, and to go over the *Darby Belle's* manifest.

The light that winked at him from the office block across the way shone from the bunched candles at her desk He had only to cross the road and put her to the test Now that the moment was upon him, he could only curse himself for waiting so long

He waited a few moments more, while he turned up his coat collar and stepped out to the edge of the bluff Automatically, his eyes conned the row of anchored ships along the channel buoys, to be sure that no new arrival had dared to slip by quarantine As always, he could take a certain quiet satisfaction in that quarantine station—established by his order, and over the foaming opposition of many honest merchants Since his election as health officer, an event that had set the town by its ears that June, he had counted his inspection among his few real triumphs It was quite true that vessels slipped by in the night, to moor brazenly at Matthew Bristol's new dock under the Eastern Bluff It was true that old Bristol had defied his authority to fine such ship captains, or to search their hulls for imaginary plagues But most of the Savannah shipping followed orders, rather than forfeit the right to unload at the Darby docks.

Old Bristol's entrance into the shipping field had posed a real threat so far

All the same, Toby took the time to scowl at the Bristol dockside, crowded three deep this afternoon with tall-masted vessels. Many of these were coastwise craft and flew the Bristol flag, others were barnacled tubs from Nassau and the British Indies, unloading rum and London-crated iron to exchange for Georgia naval stores and such tobacco as old Bristol had been able to scrape together on credit . . . Only yesterday Toby had paused at the vendue house to hear that the Bristol credit was flourishing nowadays Some even said that his aged enemy would soon buy and sell for hard money, thanks to Harvey Bristol's prosperity abroad

He damned young Bristol's ease at money-making and old Bristol's future menace with the same fluency as he stumped down the bluff and paused in the shelter of a sandstone outcrop to check his own wealth one more time Directly below his vantage point the houses of Muskrat Town seemed dejected as so many muddy beavers in the rain; by contrast, the square mass of the Darby warehouse was secure as some medieval fortress ringed by sullen serfs There was a fortune in bagged rice within those walls, waiting for seagoing bottoms to turn it into gold, another fortune in prime leaf would come downstream from Darbyville when the weather cleared—a crop that would even surpass last year's record Today, this tangible proof that the Darby Company was on the verge of triumph seemed no more real than Bristol and his bullies. Nothing really mattered but his resolve to put Nancy Gregory to the test—and the symbol of that resolve, straining at her hawsers far down the Darby pier

The flagship of the Darby fleet was loaded deep—so deep, in fact, that she wallowed a bit in her berth in a way no sea queen should wallow Toby had made sure of that much days ago. It was part of his strategy that all Savannah should watch the Darby riches go aboard in broad daylight, until the hatches of the vessel seemed ready to burst apart, and the last available foot of deck space was humped with lashed-down cargo The loadings had been finished on Monday, it was Thursday now, and Bronson and a full crew still awaited sailing orders So much for preliminaries The real test lay ahead

Why did he hesitate to speak the words that would put that test in motion? Why, when his mind insisted that Nancy Darby Gregory was both guilty and damned, did he pause before damning her with chapter-and-verse proof?

He crossed the wet oyster-shell roadbed of The Bay in a

dozen long-legged strides, leaving the questions unanswered. Banishing the impulse to linger yet another moment on the steps of the town office block, he entered the counting-house floor with his eyes straight ahead, accepting the adoration of chief-clerk Leary and his round-shouldered entourage, without breaking his charge toward the stair that led to the private office floor above. There, finally, was the open doorway of his sanctum, the desk with its row of freshly cut quills, the shaded candlestand that seemed to invite a scholar rather than a man of affairs There, beyond the snug dance of the firelight on the hearth, was the dark oblong of the doorway that gave to Nancy's office—closed as always, nowadays, by mutual consent, though he could hear the scratch of her pen inside, the faint hiss of sand as she blotted yet another page in the *Darby Belle's* manifest There, basking like a lazy lizard in the warmth, was Gabriel Thatch, his booted feet among the president's own papers, his fashionable shovel hat cocked at the usual saucy angle

"Don't say I'm not expected, Toby—I'll quite agree Don't say I'm not welcome—or I'll go in and talk first to Nancy"

Toby flung his rain-soaked cape into a corner and settled at his desk as Gabriel dropped his feet from that polished desert of mahogany "If you've come for another interview, there's no news"

"The Darby Company is always news these days Especially its president" The journalist's eyes still lingered on the closed door to Nancy's sanctum. "Shall I tell Nancy you're here at last—and talk business with you both? Or is it true that you still aren't speaking?"

Toby kept his eyes on the report he was pretending to read "It's only partially true. We speak when necessary."

"Which isn't often?"

"Right again We do our separate jobs here As it happens, they don't conflict"

Gabriel sighed—not too deeply. "Separate statements will do, I suppose In fact, they'll make an even better story, from Savannah's point of view"

"Come to your point, Gabe, if you have one You can see I'm busy."

"On the contrary, I see that you're in the happy position of a man with his work behind him Thanks to Nancy's industry, you've a king's ransom in rice downstairs—or under that flagship's hatches Thanks to the work Sam Hoyt's done upriver, you've another fortune in tobacco awaiting shipment Barring piracy or acts of God, you've won your gamble, and Nancy's lost. Your only concern, from this

point to your second anniversary as the company's president, is to sit back and pray."

Toby permitted himself a small smile. "True enough, so far. Of course you can't bar acts of God."

"Or the brothers of the coast—if they're lucky enough to jump Bronson down river."

"Have you heard rumors along that line?"

"There are always pirates in our coastal bayous, Toby. There'll always be, God knows, until this infant nation learns to build a navy of its own. Naturally the word has gone out that the *Darby Belle* is carrying her richest cargo."

Toby nodded. That, too, was part of the trap he had discussed with no one. "Bronson has escaped them before. Why shouldn't his luck hold—if he slips away without warning?"

"Why not indeed?" Again Gabriel's eyes strayed to the closed door. "Is Nancy boiling—or resigned?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, Gabe. She hasn't asked me to test her temperature."

"Call the girl what you like, Toby. I hardly think she's a poor loser."

"Why assume she's ready to admit defeat? We've a long way to go until April."

"But the company's in the homestretch—and running like a thoroughbred. The company's a synonym for prosperity, from Havana to the Thames. By April your warehouses should be empty—or near enough to assure a real profit for your second year. You've more than fulfilled Victor Darby's wishes as of now. And I repeat that his daughter will be the first to admit it."

"Walk through that door to her desk and repeat that. I'll wait here for the explosion."

But Gabriel remained unruffled. "You won't admit you're in love with her—even now?"

"You've asked that question before, I believe."

"I'm still waiting for an honest answer—now that you've melted to the point of visiting her at Sangaree."

"I went out to Sangaree just once, for business reasons. That was over six months ago."

"And you discussed nothing but rice on that visit?"

Toby's fist smashed down on the desk top. "I won't be baited, Gabe."

"Say you go to her now, in November. Offer to make her your wife in April—if only to save Sangaree."

"Six months ago, if I remember rightly, I told you I'd sooner bed a wildcat."

"A vigorous metaphor," said Gabriel. "But hardly accu-

rate. That, if *you'll* remember rightly, was my answer at the time It bears repeating"

Remembering that last incredible moment in the library at Sangaree—and Nancy's even stranger gesture at surrender—Toby spoke warily It was quite possible, he reflected, that Gabe was here today in Nancy's behalf.

"Argue it your way, if you insist. What makes you think she'd have me?"

"Point one," said Gabriel, "you're a handsome devil, even when you're scowling Most world-weary widows should be glad to bed you on a permanent basis Point two, you'll be in absolute command of the richest property in Georgia come April Why shouldn't you take up residence at Sangaree, and save both the manor house and its mistress?"

"Leave that to the mistress She has a five-thousand-pound credit in London now, on her own crop."

"Most of that cash money belongs to the Darby Company, to liquidate the mortgage she gave you."

"You're well informed, Gabe"

"I'll tell you more Nancy was gambling from the start that you'd fail—that she'd recover her share of the estate outright. That's why she borrowed to rebuild the property itself, and put in that extra threshing floor, and bought ninety prime Angola blacks in Havana"

"The company will buy up her Negroes—and her threshing floor It'll buy every acre she'll part with, at a fair price Yes, and pay her dividends as a director—even if she doesn't lift a finger——" He stopped awkwardly, realizing that he was all but shouting In the silence he could hear Nancy's quill scratching tranquilly in the room beyond

"You don't mean a word, of course," said Gabriel. "You'd marry her tomorrow, if you could be sure she'd have you. And you'd keep Sangaree as the company's headquarters."

"Have it your way, Gabe I refuse to argue."

"Because there's no argument Because you know in your heart that Sangaree needs a master to make it complete Like all lovely things, including widows, it was born to be dominated"

"Your poetry has charm, Gabe, but it's a bit hard to follow."

"Never in my life have I been more coherent," said the journalist. He got up lazily and flicked Toby's empty desk with his riding crop "Never in your life have you been more dishonest with yourself."

"I think you've said enough"

"More than enough, my friend Go on pretending to be busy, if you insist. But your work here is over. Your work

at Sangaree is just beginning Or should I say your work on its fair chatelaine?" Gabriel strolled out on that, ignoring Toby's black-browed scowl as he entered Nancy's sanctum with the lightest of taps on the connecting door.

Fortunately it was impossible to be angry with Gabriel Thatch for more than a fleeting moment Toby found that he was almost smiling, after a few roaring turns of the office. Behind the closed door to Nancy's sanctum, he could hear Gabriel's sharp, teasing voice and Nancy's low-voiced replies, without quite catching the actual words It cost an effort to keep his ear from the keyhole, but he resisted that impulse manfully Precisely as he had resisted an even stronger impulse to pin Gabe to his own office for a few more words he dared not speak

"Even a first-rate journalist doesn't know everything, my friend Even you haven't suspected that Nancy Gregory—the woman you're suggesting I marry—is a bloodsucker, in league with pirates"

Obviously he could never speak those words without proof positive Just as obviously he must keep his own counsel until that proof was in his hands

He settled at his desk, taking what cold comfort he could from that resolve Spreading a sheet of note paper, he snatched up a quill, and wrote rapidly, without pausing to weigh his words.

Mistress Gregory·

Your Slave, Priam, was operated by me this *post meridian,* for an aggravated case of strangulated Hernia—and I am happy to announce that in my Opinion, and that of my Assistant, Dr. Walter Appleby, he is Safely delivered from Danger

Customarily, when we accept cases from Citizens who are able to pay a doctor's fee, our charge for Majors of this kind is Five Pounds, Sterling, or Fifty Spanish-Milled Dollars However, since you are one of the Official Darby Family, so to speak, may we offer you this hospital service gratis—even though Priam is your Property, and not the Company's?

Yr. Obd't Servant

Tobias Kent

Satisfied that the note would cut her to the quick, he closed it with a wax wafer and stamped it with the company seal It was not the first time he had communicated with her thus, when a few shouted words would have done as well . . . Tossing the note in his letter basket, where Leary would be sure to see it on his next trip upstairs, he quartered the office one more time and fought down the impulse to eavesdrop on the conversation that still hummed vaguely behind Nancy's door.

He relaxed in earnest when he heard Gabriel's boot sound on the stairway, and a soft rustle of petticoats that told him Nancy, too, had gone downstairs to confer with Leary Then, to fill his cup of bitterness to the brim, he turned to his window, to stare down at the spars of the *Darby Belle,* gaunt as gallows trees against the stormy day. .

No one in Savannah, he was sure, could guess that he had planned to send Captain Bronson to sea tonight, regardless of weather No one but Nancy Darby would know, when he closed his office door. As tests went, this one had the merit of simplicity Until that test was made, a drawn sword at her office door could not have separated them more ruthlessly.

iii

He was still glaring at an empty desk top when Bronson snorted on the landing, and remembered, just in time, to light fresh candles, snatch up a pen, and open a ledger at random With the captain's knock, he felt his brain clear magically. From this point on, thank Heaven, there could be no retreat—and no regrets

The captain of the *Darby Belle* rumbled into the office with his familiar outdoor serenity, unbuttoning his pea jacket against the grateful warmth, the luxuriant side whiskers he raised between voyages were spangled with rain, a sure sign that he had been checking equipment on his spar deck Once again Toby felt his spirits bound as they struck palms Bronson's handshake was honest as his wide-spaced eyes, Bronson could be counted on to play his game to the hilt

"Good luck on the voyage, Captain."

"So I'm to go at will?"

"You're to go with tonight's tide, and damn the weather"

Bronson took his orders with aplomb. "Wind's shiftin' now, Doc I figured it to set due west by sundown, and hold steady Don't let the weather worry you We'll go out under topsails, when you like"

"I want you to go tonight, come what may That tobacco has been under hatches long enough, it should be unloaded at Tilbury Docks before it spoils"

Bronson arched his bushy eyebrows Both of them knew perfectly that the tobacco hogsheads would preserve their precious contents indefinitely. "Askin' your pardon once again, Dr. Kent, but is there more here than meets the eye?" His voice was both curious and dubious

"A bit more, I'm afraid"

"No sealed orders in my cabin, I hope?"

"You can ask me what you like, Captain I'll answer truthfully"

"This is my ninth crossin' in the *Darby Belle*. On all the others I picked my own sailin' date—for reasons well known to us both This voyage I'm broaching powder and shot for my crew from the start, and taking two more long nines overside Are you setting a date with our friends down river —to see who's the better shot?"

"You know me better than that, Captain."

"Don't think I'm complainin' because we go out in dirty weather And don't think I wouldn't relish a brush with any bloodsucker who shows his face north of Wassaw Sound" Bronson fumbled for his tobacco, and tamped down a short clay pipe with deliberation. "Course, if you don't trust me with more——"

"I'll leave two points with you, Captain," said Toby. He chose his words with care, rather enjoying Bronson's close scrutiny "First, no one in Savannah knows you're heavily armed Second, I'm praying that you'll have no need of those nine-pounders, down river or at sea"

"You mean you hope Savannah will soon be civilized enough to publish sailin' dates—without fear of piracy?"

"Precisely. This is a test, of a sort. A rudimentary test, in fact The last thing I intend doing is publish your sailing orders until you're well at sea"

"Tell it your way, Doc," said Bronson, puffing contentedly "I'll try to enjoy it"

"We've lost just seven ocean-going ships to the freebooters down river since we set up shop If you'll remember, most of those skippers wrote down his sailing date in his log and sent a copy to this office a few hours before he cast off from Darby Dock Since then we've let all our important shipping go out at will—and better than halved our losses. What does that suggest to your mind?"

"A leak in this office, naturally"

"Today we go back to the old system, or pretend to If you clear the river bar without incident, we'll chalk off those earlier losses to bad luck If you must fight your way to sea, we'll know there's a traitor in our nest" He drew a deep, painful breath, then went on resolutely. "And I'll take steps to end the leak, once and for all"

"Any likely candidates, as of now?"

"I won't name names until I'm sure, Captain It isn't fair"

"Quite proper, sir. You may consider that question withdrawn" Bronson's whiskers were framed in an aureole of strong tobacco smoke Toby was sure that the firm lips around the pipestem were grinning "And you needn't apolo-

gize, usin' my flagship as a decoy. Believe me, I'm honored."

"Do the men suspect the worst?"

"I've held 'em aboard since dawn, expectin' just such an order. Every jack is grindin' his cutlass and itchin' to make sail."

"Will you believe me when I say I'd give a great deal to go along?"

"Why don't you, Doc? Even with luck, my guess is we can use an extra sawbones before morning." It was a simple statement, with no overtone of false heroics. Bronson answered his own question in the same matter-of-fact tone "Course I know you can't sail with me. Not on what's got to look like a routine voyage. Never do to tip our hand by takin' the president of the company aboard."

"I'm afraid that about covers the case, Captain. Believe me, I wish I could tell you more."

"Never you mind, Doc. It's my turn to report now. Say I fetch the bar buoy without incident. I put to sea, and you figure no news is good news. It that agreeable?"

Again Toby breathed deep as he murmured a whispered prayer. Aloud he said only, "That's what we're hoping for."

"If there's gunfire, they'll hear it at Sangaree Miss Nancy could send you word, if she wasn't already in Savannah Maybe one of her overseers—"

"The sound might not carry against a following wind. And we can't risk posting a lookout at the river's mouth, or even in Wassaw Sound If they do jump you, they'll jump from any one of a dozen pockets in the marsh."

"True enough." Bronson's calm was almost Homeric in its bland concentration on the problem at hand "Say we give as good as they send, or better. I'll still like to run for it, and send back word by way of Charleston. Or, if I'm really hurt, I'll limp back to dockside best I can."

"That's what I hoped you'd say, Captain. Thank you for saying it on your own."

Bronson chuckled through his rank smoke haze. "You know I fought beside DeGrasse, Doc. This is small game in my dictionary."

"Let's hope your dictionary is accurate. Will you tap on that door and ask Mrs. Gregory to bring in the cargo manifest?"

He had expected his voice to falter; he had been sure his eyes would cloud when the connecting door swung wide and Nancy Gregory stood at his desk. But he had never sounded calmer, even to his own incredulous ears, as he addressed her crisply.

"You've prepared those cargo lists in duplicate, Mrs. Gregory?"

"As always, Doctor."

"Captain Bronson will sign the original now. We'll retain a copy for Leary's files."

"As we've done for the past six months, Doctor." Her voice, he noted, was colorless as her manner, her proud erect body, slender in dark-brown gingham, was sexless as a lath. "Must you instruct me in the rudiments of our filing system with Captain Bronson as a witness?"

"I'm afraid it's necessary today, Mrs. Gregory." Matching her tone for ice, he prolonged the pause deliberately as she opened both bulky ledgers on the desk top. "Today we're making a slight addition to the—the duplicate." Again he paused, while they both watched Bronson affix his signature to the final page of the first manifest "However, it's a bit of counting-house routine that needn't detain the captain "

Striking palms again with Bronson, Toby accepted the captain's wink in good faith—to say nothing of the captain's bulldog courage. He felt only a slight qualm when Bronson shook hands with Nancy quite as heartily. At the moment it seemed incredible that this slender girl might be the instrument that would send both the *Darby Belle* and its crew to the bottom before the night was out.

"Good sowing to you both," boomed the captain "The paddies will be in flower before we meet again, I daresay "

"Not if you beat your last crossing," said Nancy.

"Supposin' I do? Will it win me a turkey dinner at Sangaree?"

"And a bonus from this office," said Toby

"Keep your bonus, Doc I'll take Miss Nancy's fowl—providin' it's served with chestnut dressin' and some of the old gentleman's claret " He was gone with the words, as though a wisp of the outside gale had swung the door shut behind him Toby heard his voice hum in the stairwell and a final shouted goody-by to Leary—a good-by as casual as though the captain had been planning a visit across the river instead of a brush with buccaneers

"You mentioned a change in the routine, Doctor?"

He turned back to Nancy's cool question with something like relief "Captain Bronson sails for London at ten tonight Will you check the tide table on your desk and note the exact minute of his departure on your copy of his manifest?

"Certainly, Doctor May I ask why?"

"From this point on I want our records complete "

"Shall I make the enry now?"

"If you please."

There was no flicker of emotion on her face as she returned to her own office If she's elated at this chance, she's masking it perfectly, thought Toby—even as he remembered how perfect her other masks had been. After all, she had played Dolly Lake, her non-existent maid-servant, like a veteran. To say nothing of her performance as woman of affairs and woman of the world. Her final performance as an all-but-willing bride, there in the shadow of her father's portrait at Sangaree . . . He came back to the fateful present, realizing that Nancy was waiting at his elbow with a tide table in her hand

"The *Darby Belle* will sail at ten-fifteen, Doctor. As you see, I've noted the date on the manifest."

"Good enough You may put it in Leary's file when you like" He watched her close the ledger with sick knowing eyes. "Perhaps it would be safer to lock it in your own desk tonight. Until Bronson is actually at sea. But you may use your own judgment."

"Is the captain still afraid of pirates?"

Don't overplay your role, he raged Don't test me with too many ingenuous questions, or I'll accuse you to your face. Aloud he said only, "It's a chance we must take with each voyage. Naturally I trust our office workers—don't you?"

"To the last man, Doctor May I go?"

"By all means I had no intention of detaining you"

In her own doorway she half-turned and spoke with averted eyes "I received your memorandum—about Priam"

"It was a routine operation Don't mention it, please"

"He happens to be my best boatman. I do want to thank you for saving him" She hesitated in earnest before she spoke again. "Naturally I'd pay you for your—your surgery, if I could afford it But I've no hard money left, now I've settled my company mortgage. Only some bills of exchange in London"

"I've told you that payment was quite unnecessary. Since you're still one of our directors——"

"Would you accept Priam himself in payment?"

"Really, Mrs Gregory——"

"You won't believe this, but saving his life was my chief concern. That's why I sent him to your clinic, and not to Matthew Bristol Now that he'll recover, he'll be useful to you Especially as I hear you're thinking of a sloop of your own"

"I'll sail my own sloop, thank you"

But Nancy went on as though she had not heard. "He

knows the Savannah by memory. He'd be especially useful, if you could bring yourself to pay Sangaree another visit "

"Will that be necessary, since you're managing things so perfectly?"

He caught, and welcomed, her flash of anger—and waited for an explosion that did not come Instead, she turned slowly toward the facing door, a portal that gave to Roy's seldom-used office. For an instant he thought that Nancy intended to vanish into that empty room instead of her own sanctum Then he realized that she was only listening to a faint rustle within

"It seems that Martha has paid us another visit, Doctor," she said coldly "Shall I invite her in, before we quarrel in earnest?"

But Toby himself had already gone to tap on Roy's door. For once Martha would be a welcome diversion, now that he had baited his trap in earnest. Both of them knew that Martha came to the office block frequently, when a sailing date was in the offing, to address letters to her absent husband, though it was the only obvious sign that she missed Roy's presence in any way. Both of them knew that she used this subterfuge to waylay Toby these autumn evenings He had felt the question in Nancy's eyes when their paths had crossed on Bull Street, sensing her unspoken contempt now as the door swung wide. he took pleasure in ignoring it

Martha, sanding a letter at Roy's desk, offered them both her most disarming smile Comparing the two women one more time, Toby could curse his rigid morals fluently enough. In clinging green satin and a hat bright with egret plumes, Martha's lure struck its familiar chord in his heart—a deep, yearning chord of desire untouched by love. By contrast, Nancy's severe brown gingham was almost dowdy Yet Nancy herself, for all her sexless aloofness, could have vanquished that lure with one soft word

"Don't tell me I'm invited to headquarters in business hours?" Martha's slightly husky voice was a trifle unsteady this afternoon She's been drinking again, thought Toby with a sinking heart, as he handed her gallantly across the threshold She's been hard enough to fend off lately, even without the inspiration of brandy

"If that letter is for London, Martha, it can go in the office bag "

"Who else would I write to, besides my husband?" The letter was already in his hand, he saw that it was adressed to Dr Roy Darby's chambers, Temple Bar, in the round schoolgirl script that Martha had learned so painfully at Clay Creek—a script that contrasted oddly with the ruby-

and-emerald sunburst on Martha's finger. He dropped her hand, striving to ignore the insistence of its pressure

"Just one letter this time, my dear?" Nancy's voice had only a slight edge Give the girl her due, thought Toby, she's tried hard to like Martha, even when Martha's wild-catting has been most flagrant.

"One is more than he deserves. He hasn't written me in months" Martha smiled quickly at Toby—a smile old as Lilith's, and just as pointed "Thanks to Dr Kent, I haven't been too lonesome And to *you*, dear, of course"

Nancy closed the *Darby Belle* manifest with a snap "I've spent what time I could spare in Savannah"

"Have you been lonesome, too, with Felix in Philadelphia?"

"I've been unaware of Captain Pagnol's whereabouts, Martha"

"Some say he's been in Philadelphia," said Martha "Others insist he disappeared from Savannah, for reasons of his own. I did hope you could set the gossip at rest."

"I think we should all be above gossip, Martha."

"What else can one do in such weather?"

"Speak for yourself, my dear," said Nancy, and swept from the room, with the ledger under her arm

Martha smiled indulgently at the swift-closing door "I gave her the last word on purpose, Toby. Otherwise, we might never have been rid of her"

"Was it necessary to be quite so rude?"

"Don't speak to me of rudeness D'you realize she practically accused me of fornication to my face?"

"Only after you sneered at Pagnol, Martha"

"I warned you about Felix Pagnol your first day in Savannah When will you open your eyes?"

The urge to speak his mind was hard to conquer, but he knew that Martha would prove a dangerous confidante "Nancy was right about one thing—the Darbys should be above gossip."

"We're both changelings in the Darby nest, my love. We can sing what tune we like—in private, at least"

Her hand, insistent as ever, was on his arm as she spoke. With her free fingers she caressed his cheek gently He broke away quickly and crossed to the window to stare down into the rain-lashed esplanade of The Bay

"The Darbys have been good to you, Martha Don't go on mocking them forever"

"The Darbys have always hated me, Toby. All but Roy, and he endures me If I hadn't learned to laugh in their smug faces I'd have gone mad long ago"

Without turning he knew that she had settled in his chair

and buried her head in her arms. He heard her facile sobs, and knew that he was lost if he turned to comfort her For no reason he could name he felt that those sobs were partially genuine, today. That Martha Darby, for once, was the victim of her own thirst for pleasure, no matter what the cost

"Isn't it time you dressed for dinner, Martha?"

"I'm dining alone—unless you'll join me"

"Company business will keep me late tonight"

"A pox on your company business." She was still crying, though her voice had begun to regain its old spirit. "That means you'll dine at Tondee's and keep clear of the house till morning Why, Toby?"

"You'll have Nancy for company"

"Nancy is dining at the Tyrees'. She won't be back until midnight." Had she laid her bedoom key on the desk, Martha could not have been more explicit Still at the window, he could read the ritual of her attack by heart The wet lashes, craftily lowered, to give her eyes their deepest mystery. The half-parted lips, ready to flame under his kiss . .

"I'm afraid I must disappoint you nonetheless, Martha."

He turned as she rose from his desk, and this, too, was part of their long love duel. "And I needn't tell you why I'll stay away tonight"

"I'll hold dinner until nine, in case you change your mind"

Watching her from the corner of his eye, he saw that she had come around the desk and leaned back against the mantel—a move which gave full play to each of her rich contours Making his voice as civil as he could, and cursing its slight huskiness, he kept his attention on the sidewalk below the window.

"You must stop coming here in office hours It's causing talk"

"I thought we Darbys were above gossip."

He pressed his forehead hard against the windowpane and fought for calm Nancy whisked out of the entrance to the office block as he watched, shawled and bonneted to the eyes Her brown skirt flared in the dying day as she vanished into a waiting sedan chair In a moment her bright head, minus the old-maidish bonnet, popped from the chair window With a familiar dread at his heart, Toby watched her speak a few words to the slave who had darted up, like an obedient shadow, and vanished as quickly into the rainy twilight

Had she established her guilt with a few whispered words? Was that dark messenger on his way to Pagnol, to say that the *Darby Belle* would sail at ten tonight?

He turned back to the shadowed room—and the silhou-

ette of Martha Darby, sensed rather than seen against the faint dance of the firelight While he hesitated at the window, she had snuffed out his candles one by one—another move in the ritual of her pursuit. Guessing the next move before it came, he put out a hand to shield himself, and felt her fingers close on his, to draw hand and arm about her supple waist.

"Kiss me just once, Toby, and I'll go for now"

There had been too many such kisses of late, he told himself. Wild, heart-bursting embraces, stolen in the shadow of the trustees' Garden, in the midnight gloom of a stairwell. Heady tribute, exacted by Martha as the price of a temporary withdrawal . . . Tonight, with the thought of Nancy gnawing at his vitals, he would need a powerful antidote. Better this yielding body than another demijohn in the back room of Tondee's Tavern—or a doxy in Muskrat Town The conviction, exploding like gunpowder in his brain, sent his senses reeling When his head cleared, he found he was devouring her lips and throat with his kisses

"Wait, Toby!" Her deep, throaty chuckle all but drowned her words—a command with invitation at its blazing core

"You said we'd waited too long" He had flung her back across the desk as he spoke, pinioning her plump shoulders as he pressed another long, searching kiss between her breasts. I'll have you on this unyielding bed, he promised her silently —letting his hands work their will We'll destroy each other among these inkpots and Leary's well-cut quills For a few blank moments, at least, we'll destroy the thought of Nancy Gregory as though she'd never been. . . .

"Please, Toby!"

He had forgotten how strong she could be—and how determined A single-minded eel could not have slipped from his grasp more readily—or with greater aplomb. Even in that twisted moment he could not help gaping as Martha backed gracefully to the door, twirled her supple body just once in its tight green sheath until she was decently covered again, then turned to the mirror to set her hair to rights

"Don't think I'm not grateful, sweet. But I want you in my own bed—in my own way."

Toby stayed at the desk, and saved himself from falling by gripping its corners Too shamed to speak, much less to resume his attack, he watched her tie a broken lacing at her bodice and set her egret-proud hat at its usual angle At the moment he had never hated another human being more intensely. Desire had ebbed in his blood in that taut half-minute—to be replaced by a dull, rhythmic pounding at the base of his brain In another hour it would be a thumping headache—and clamoring for the usual remedy. . . .

"I'll still hold dinner until nine," said Martha. "Come to me sober, if you can We *are* old friends, Toby Kent, but my patience has limits"

She's sure of me now, he thought wildly. So sure that she can set her own place, her own time.

"You'd better go, Martha," he said through tight lips. "I won't be at Wright Square tonight."

"Come to me sober, if you can," she said "And try to come before midnight Nancy will return from the Tyrees' by then She has ears like a bobcat"

"We can leave Nancy out of this"

"Don't be an idiot, Toby. She's been jealous of me from the beginning"

Her voice was vibrant with triumph as she paused in the doorway She had never seemed lovelier, never more alive—or more purely evil Still clinging to the desk top, as a man might fasten on the last sure anchor in a whirling world, he let her go without a word. I'll see you damned before I touch you again, he thought I'll drink myself blind at Tondee's, get through this night somehow, and find peace again with the morning With the certainty of Nancy's guilt, or innocence, I'll know tranquillity again

Even as his mind coined these pious promises another, craftier part of him was plotting at top speed. A demijohn at Tondee's, first of all. Blackstrap rum, for choice—or whisky, if need be His usual corner of the cliff, halfway down the slope to Muskrat Town—a demijohn was good company in a rain squall. Finally, a draggle-tailed return to Wright Square, and Martha's waiting arms There's solace in those arms tonight, that other self whispered. Any solace is better than the question that must wait through the dawn for its answer.

iv

It was hardly nine by Christ's Church bells, and he was nearly sober after all, when he stumbled through the gateposts of the Darby town house That bland Georgian façade had never seemed to threaten him before Tonight, as he forced his feet up the pathway to the door, the house seemed huge as Moloch—glaring at him through bright eye sockets, crouching, with wide-open maw, to devour him if he ventured one step nearer.

Had he ventured deeper in his demijohn, he might have fled that threat one more time Tonight, walking almost steadily and driving fist to palm as though to pin down his resolution, he knew that such fancies were groundless Martha

was at the spinet, just inside the latticed windows of the great drawing room; there was no mistaking the sparkling inaccuracy of that Mozart rondo He would merely bow from the hall, explain that he had already dined at Tondee's, and proceed up the stairway to his rooms Bolting his door against Eros, he would wait out the morning, and news from Bronson.

Or, even more simply, he might take her in his arms and finish what he had begun in his office. It was almost pleasant, now, to float in limbo between these two choices To know that he was drunk—but not too drunk to play the blind animal who lusted at her bidding

Rain dashed coldly into his eyes He brushed the drops aside and pulled his hatbrim lower as he slogged through the last stretch of pathway between gateposts and desire When the hand closed on his arm, there in the wind-tortured dark, he just escaped crying aloud For one fantastic instant he was certain that the tall, shrouded figure in the shadow of the oleander was Martha, waiting to claim him, like a vampire in the dank shadow. Then he breathed in a mingled aroma of brandy and tobacco and knew that the pale triangle of flesh, framed in the boat-cloak hood, was Gabriel's mocking grin

Gabriel said not too patiently, "I've been waiting quite awhile, Toby. Why can't you do your after-dark drinking at home?"

"Why couldn't you wait under cover?"

"With Lorelei just inside? This is no time for distractions of that tender sort." The journalist shook the water from his shawled shoulders, for all the world like an *irritable* retriever on the scent. "Believe me, I speak with authority"

"Come up to my rooms You must dry yourself"

"On the contrary Before this evening is out I expect to be even wetter A fact that goes double for you, my friend" Gabriel had already drawn Toby into the dripping shelter of the oleander Now he dropped his voice to a *whisper* "You'll hear this my way, or not at all. So please don't interrupt"

Toby hunched his shoulders deeper into his own greatcoat With each passing moment he could feel the benign fire of good Jamaica diminish in his blood stream But there was something in Gabriel's manner that compelled attention, no matter how irritable.

"If you'll make it short——"

"Short and bitter, my friend Did you know the *Darby Belle* has been marked for capture tonight?"

Toby took the question quietly enough, though he reeled a little under its impact One fist, clawing deep into the green

heart of the oleander, showered them both with raindrops as he steadied. After all, Gabriel had teased him with similar ruses before—to pin down a sailing date.

"The *Darby Belle* is still at her moorings."

"She's to sail with the tide. At ten-fifteen to the minute. One hour and twenty minutes from now, if my watch isn't waterlogged."

"How d'you know that? How can you know?"

"I know more. Sometime between midnight and dawn, she'll be surprised, boarded, and looted. Or perhaps taken outright, if Bronson's fool enough to put up a running battle—"

"How can you know, Gabe?"

The journalist took a flask from a side pocket, drank deep, and passed it to Toby without comment. "The facts, as usual, are simple. Tonight I dined at the Bird in Hand, with a lady who shall be nameless."

"If you mean Nancy——!"

Gabriel blinked in earnest. "What, in God's name, does Nancy have to do with this? The lady, since you insist, wasn't a lady at all, but a serving wench from Tondee's. Tonight she felt it might be more discreet to do her sleeping off Tondee's premises——"

"Never mind your doxy. Where'd you pick up this news?"

"Where else but the Bird in Hand, at the very moment I was bedding her? There were people in the next suite. Several people, I gathered. All of them sailormen, and all of them drunk. Too drunk to notice the transom between their room and ours. . . . First, they ordered rum, with dinner to follow. They began wrangling with the boniface over his livery fees. Seems they wanted a horse apiece, for a fast run to Wassaw Sound."

"And the *Darby Belle?*"

"They made no secret of their calling, once they were alone. Apparently their ship is anchored at the mouth of the Wilmington River. It was even more apparent that they'd been planted in Muskrat Town to await news of the sailing. By riding overland to join their skipper, they'd have time to spare."

Toby just escaped groaning aloud. The pattern was unmistakable now, but he tortured it a bit longer, to be positive.

"Did you hear their skipper's name?"

"They weren't drunk enough for that. They merely insisted among themselves that he could outsail, outguess, and outgun Bronson."

"And you're sure they were informed of the sailing date?"

"If I weren't, would I have left a warm bed and a lady who'll never forgive my abruptness?"

The dark, deep ache of discovery persisted, but its agony was blunted, mercifully enough, in the need for action Already Toby was fumbling through the map of his memory in an effort to pin the freebooter down. If the tag end of her crew planned to make for Wassaw Sound, it seemed evident that her unknown skipper was bold indeed. The Wilmington River, at whose mouth the corsair had dropped anchor, emptied through that wide bay, a scant ten miles south of the Savannah's mouth Cumbered with brush-covered islands, laced with tidal sloughs and thickets of yucca and cabbage palm, Wassaw Sound was an ideal setting for a hit-and-run battle There was deep water straight out to the coastal bar Toby himself had sailed that course a dozen times, when they had planned a final exit for their merchantmen Even at the bar itself the water was deep enough for a navigator who knew the channels to maneuver at will

"It seems the timing is perfect," he said, all but unaware that he had spoken aloud. Coasting down river with the tide, clinging to the deep central channel, Bronson would hold back deliberately until the first light before venturing to set a course for the open sea Thanks to the mists that rose from the coastal marshes in autumn, the pirate could choose his own moment for his first broadside and rake the merchantman at will

Gabriel completed his thought neatly enough "Whoever that buccaneer may be, he must have been warned to wait Now he's been warned of an ideal time to strike A sitting duck would have a better chance."

"Bronson doesn't sail for an hour. We can hold him at the pier Send a courier to Charleston."

"And miss our best free-for-all since the war?" said Gabriel scornfully. "You should stay sober, Doctor Even after dark. Rum doesn't sharpen your brain as it does mine."

Again Gabriel passed the flask there in the wet gloom of the oleander. They drank deep in turn, bowing gravely to each other, like marionettes responding to invisible wires.

"Do you follow my drift, Toby, or must I draw you a map?"

"I'm beginning to sense the outlines"

"Point one, Sam Hoyt's at the dock now, fitting your sloop with storm sails Point two, we can reach Wassaw Sound, via the Savannah, almost as fast as those tar heads, even if they do miss all the potholes Point three, if they are riding down to their ship on horseback, she must be anchored somewhere near the South Road landing"

"Probably in the lee of Wilmington Island. Are you suggesting that the three of us storm her in the dark?"

"I'm suggesting that we blow her out of the water and let the *Darby Belle* sail on schedule. If we fail, there'll still be time to warn Bronson."

"And how do we smuggle gunpowder aboard the buccaneer?"

"You *are* slow-witted tonight, Doctor. Don't tell me you've forgotten the *Wasp* so quickly."

Toby found he could still chuckle, despite the ache at his heart. The single exploit of the *Wasp* had been one of the brightest chapters in the Raiders' history. Commissioned by Victor Darby himself as a kind of water scout on Lake Champlain, the trim sloop had been painted black from outwater to forepeak; even her sails had been dyed, making her all but invisible on moonless nights. She had justified her name in broad daylight, however, when she had rammed head on into a British barge, loaded to the scuppers with ordnance for Burgoyne, with a spare torpedo lashed to her bowsprit. Gabriel himself had lighted the fuse that had sent the enemy ammunition spouting skyward—and swum to safety just in time.

"Have you discussed this with Sam?"

"He should be loading powder now in your covered wharf."

"Apparently you've planned this raid completely. Are you sure you need me at all?"

Gabriel passed the flask with a small grave bow. "That question, my dear doctor, deserves no answer. Granted, you were about to take the fair Martha in the best army tradition."

"Never mind what I was planning."

"Granted that I, too, had similar dalliance in mind. The women will keep—the corsair won't."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

The rain had thickened to a needle-point mist when they turned into Bull Street—empty as some frontier village in this drab hour. Savannah winked at them from a hundred snug doorframes, as though in pity at the risk they were assuming. Toby paused just long enough to shake his fist at Matthew Bristol's gatepost before he turned up his collar and raced in Gabriel's wake, to gain the ramp that led from The Bay to Muskrat Town. Martha and Martha's fragrant threat were forgotten in the murk behind them. So, for the moment, was Nancy Gregory—now that she had assumed her true colors . . .

"Easy does it," said Gabriel "Our freebooter's nose may still be sniffing about the Darby wharf."

"I doubt it. After all, he knows what he needs to know. Did Sam leave the door on the latch?"

"So he said. I hope you can find it in the dark"

Wind lashed their shoulders in deadly earnest now· they felt their way along the side of the huge dockside warehouse, which held the chandlers' stores as well as the covered wharf used by the company to repair its coastal snows For a moment Toby was certain that they had lost their way amid these mounds of tarpaulin-lashed goods Then his fingers outlined the brass hasp of the side door, cold as a snake's head in the rain The panel gave with an alarming creak—and they were inside the wharf shed, blinking in the converging rays of two bull's-eye lanterns Sam's voice, soothing in its way as the sleepy tap of the tide against the sides of the repair slips, pulled their eyes down to the cockpit of the sloop and the kegs stored neatly under the forward housing Toby noted that the sleek little vessel, dressed in a suit of band-new sails that were as smart as her paint, was ready to test the gale gnawing at the mouth of her shelter.

"It's a night for sailors, Toby."

"It's a better night for ducks," said Gabriel, as he sprang lightly into the cockpit "However, they say most rice-paddy overseers are born with webbed feet, Sam So I daresay you'll get by."

Toby watched them work There was something oddly pleasant in the way Gabriel brought a pair of grains poles aboard, in Sam's matter-of-fact humming as he stowed a spare mainsail under the transom seat An outsider would have felt no tension in the air, for all he could observe, these men were planning a fishing trip for tomorrow, when the weather cleared. A frontiersman, of course, would have sensed the overtones instantly Accustomed to meeting violence on its own terms, the back-country man could afford to make his preparations quietly, saving the driving impact of his rage for the proper moment

"Will she handle in this weather, Sam?"

"Wind's steadying now, Doc My guess is it'll veer this side of midnight Bring us back easier than we came"

"Providing we're still afloat" Toby jumped down into the cockpit with the words, to help Gabriel with the gear. With that movement he felt his spirit steady for the task ahead "I'm glad you think it's a chance worth taking."

"So far, I haven't had time to think" Sam's grin was still tranquil there in the harsh yellow glow of the lanterns

"Thinking isn't much help on a night like this. 'Specially when you're hunting a pirate. My guess is we'll have to *feel* for him—once we reach the bar."

Gabriel emerged from the depths of the forward housing, dusting his hands briskly. "Powder train stowed, skipper. Tinder waiting. Powder itself secured against boarding seas. Any more orders?"

"I think we can both listen awhile with profit," said Toby. "If Sam's set a course for us——"

The overseer had already spread a map on the transom seat. Toby's eyes followed the strong, much-calloused finger as it traced landmarks in the lantern light.

"There's Sangaree Island," said Sam. "Notice how the tidal reach opens there to the south and east?"

"I could sail that far myself. Even on a night like this."

"Might as well be honest, Toby. 'Twon't be easy going, once we clear the south tip of Sangaree."

Gabriel's finger came into the light, to trace the baylike opening near the river's mouth. "You won't lack seaway."

"But we will lack cover. Course we could bull right down the channel and trust to luck till we fetch the bar. But if that buzzard's watching anything tonight, it's those channel markers. We've got to jump him from another quarter."

"How can we plan until we know where he's at anchor?"

"If those sailors come down by horseback, they'll have to take the road to South Ford. That means their ship's across from Sister Island, on the landing side. Or maybe down river, near to Cabbage Island spit, if they've a small boat cached away."

"We must beat them to South Ford if we can."

"We can and will, if we cut across the marshes." Again the horny finger dwelt for an instant at the map's corner. "There used to be an old channel here—across the neck of Skidway. My guess is it's still open, with the tide at its peak. We'll take the grains poles, shove—and pray. That short cut would save us a good hour."

"Say we get near enough for a strike. How do we light the fuses?"

"Coal pot forward, skipper," said Gabriel. "Don't expect it to keep you warm. We only hope it'll hot up the pirates."

"We'll need a spar, of course."

"A spar's the last thing we'll be boarding," said Sam. "You might take your pick of those dinghy masts along the far wall."

Dinghy racing had been a summer sport among the company's dock hands. Now that the masts were stepped with bad weather, their use for tonight's project was at once

apparent. Shaved down to size from the best spruce timber, lashed with copper wiring for greater strength, these sturdy timbers leaned in a row against the warehouse wall, like bean poles in Brobdingnag Toby selected the longest and brought it aboard the sloop as comfortably as he could. Thanks to the powder kegs and the long, burlap-wrapped fuse, there was barely room for the three of them in the cockpit once the dinghy mast was lashed athwart the housing

"Shall we sail before we founder?"

"Bring up the mainsail," said Sam "I'll take the tiller."

Thanks to the high-domed roof of the wharf, this maneuver was entirely feasible

At Sam's orders Gabriel and Toby also ran out a jib and made the stern sheets fast

"What if we strip her in the wind?"

"It's a chance we must take, if we mean to beat those horsemen to the ford"

Toby nodded a quiet agreement The picture of their enterprise was clear now. There was no need to worry it further.

"You may cast off when ready, gentlemen," said Sam.

A vigorous double thrust from the grains poles was more than enough to send the sloop dancing through the open end of the shed; a second thrust, where the stringpiece ended, spun their cutwater neatly, enabling Sam to take the wind full on the shoulder of his sail The turn came just in time, as a particularly savage blast, bouncing down the Savannah bluff, threatened to turn the little vessel on her beam ends Then, as she steadied under taut sails, her hull seemed to rise like a bird In that short moment they were under way, already deep in the channel and spinning away from the dockside shipping at vertiginous speed.

Savannah, seen from the dark heart of its river, was only a jagged cliff against the sky, outlined mistily in wisps of ragged moonlight Toby glanced back just once, to ark the silhouette of the *Darby Belle,* still tugging at her moorings Then, as Sam shouted an order to come about, he leaned hard on the stern sheets and forgot to think at all

v

"Wake up, Toby!"

He stirred and muttered uneasily, conscious of bone-chilling cold, of the tag ends of curses roaring through his mind—and, finally, of Gabriel Thatch's hand on his shoulder Coming wide awake with a prodigious start, he saw that he had dozed off a second time, here in the doubtful shelter

of the transom seat Gabriel, curled like a wet hound beside him, still held a hand across Toby's mouth.

"Do you always curse in your sleep when you're at sea?"

"Sorry I didn't realize——" The tirade he had just poured on Nancy Gregory's head there in the depths of his uneasy dream still echoed in his ears, though its purport was blurred now

"I was afraid you'd begin shouting in a moment. Sam insists on quiet from this point"

Toby was wide awake to his surroundings now There was Sam Hoyt, square-cut as Ulysses himself against the clearing sky, as he leaned hard on the tiller to hold their pole even closer to the wind. There, not too far from their starboard bow, was a vast, silver-green plain of marsh—studded, here and there, with clumps of palm The main channel of the Savannah swept away to the west, roiled into endless whitecaps by the wind He could just discern the faint penciled smudge of the mainland against a backdrop of weeping clouds and the spout of white water dead ahead that outlined the contours of the harbor bar

"We couldn't have made such good time——"

"But we have That's the Skidway on our left Sam's taking us through any moment now"

The sloop heeled even as Gabriel spoke They scrambled madly, as they had done a score of times in the past three hours, to anchor the powder kegs, as they threatened to squirm from their lashings When the hull righted, they were already nosing into the marsh grass, opening a quieter stretch of water by magic, under the thrust of their bowsprit.

"How did you find that slough?"

"Luck, gentlemen," said Sam "Pray that it sits on our shoulder awhile longer We can't afford to go aground"

"In other words, man the grains poles," said Gabriel, and sprang to a gunwale Toby followed, ignoring the protests from sleep-cramped tendons

From a distance the sloop would have seemed mired in marsh, at the water level, they could pick out sea room to spare Sam babied the tiller expertly, nursing the last scrap of wind Thanks to the flood tide, there were only a few ominous scrapings during the next quarter-hour Gabriel and Toby, leaning mightily on the poles, eased the hull across these danger points without mishap Like everything else about this mad evening, this short cut was a calculated risk After the first queasy moments they found themselves taking it almost calmly.

"Open water ahead, skipper"

"Steady all!"

A final thrust of the cutwater, bouncing crazily in a sandy whorl that showed white even in the starlight The marsh-grass parted one last time, letting them burst into a vast tidal reach, with the wind still favoring.

"The Wilmington River," said Sam. "We've made it."

"Not if we've guessed wrong about their berth."

"Due east, if you please This is no time for doubts."

"Due east it is, skipper."

They sailed cautiously now, well in the shadow of the marsh they had just quitted. The moon had vanished long ago, only the stars, obscured by cloud scud, threatened to expose their silhouette as they set their course by a low clump of trees to the east.

"Sister Island," said Sam. "The landing will be directly across the river. I'll start quartering across in a moment."

"What if they've posted a lookout?"

"That's another chance we must take, I'm afraid"

They ran down their easting at the same brisk speed they had held since they left Savannah. No one stirred when Sam leaned on the tiller and scudded for open water The sloop, dancing through the whitecaps in mid-channel, seemed to cross the Wilmington like a homing bat By common consent her three inmates let out their breath in a concerted sigh as she entered the shadow of the farther shore

Here, as on most of the tidewater islands, a tangle of cedar, water oak, and bay grape came down to the water's edge in an all-but-unbroken wall It was hard to believe that the river road lay a scant hundred yards inland, to parallel the water with all the exactness of a ruler, until it tapered away into sandy wagon ruts at the ford; but Toby took instant confidence in the way Sam was steering. Skirting the bank so closely that the bowsprit seemed to rake the underbrush like a scythe, the overseer coasted gently with the current, seeming to pierce the murk ahead with a sixth sense of his own

"There's our landing, gentlemen Any sign of visitors?"

Their bow scraped bottom as he spoke, and Toby could just discern the outline of a few palmetto pilings, raised like nightmare arms against the starlight At the same moment the terminus of the roadbed came into view, its crushed oyster shell a wavering white ribbon in that same unreal half-light

"Someone must look for fresh hoofprints," said the overseer.

"Hold her steady, Sam I'll go ashore"

Toby was overside as he spoke, balancing as best he could on the crazy-angled planks of the landing, Gabriel plunged

a pine knot into their reservoir of live coals and handed the blazing chunk across the gunwale Again they held their breath while Toby stumped up the white roadbed and back again, but there was no sign of life about the landing, no sign of fresh tracks along the road itself

"Apparently we beat them after all"

"Let's make sure this is the landing they use," said Sam. "Though they could hardly use another, if they're anchored this close to the river's mouth"

Toby held the torch close to the earth about the landing. Signs of recent use were evident here, including a rectangle of crushed underbrush and a fresh splinter in the rotting wood of the stringpiece

"My guess is they used this spot no more than a few days ago to load"

"Then they must have left a gig about somewhere They'd hardly dare signal the mother ship for a boat, even on a night like this"

Toby jumped aboard, and Sam edged the sloop into the current again They found what they were seeking perhaps a hundred yards down river from the landing—a small ship's dinghy, carelessly hidden in the underbrush, just above a gently shoaling beach Sam drove the sloop's nose inshore until the bow was firmly grounded All of them could breathe a bit easier now, the fact that the dinghy was in such comparatively plain view, and unguarded, indicated that their quarry was confident that it could strike, from its hiding place, without fear of discovery.

"They can't be too far down river," said Sam "This chip would be too hard to handle in open water I'm all but positive we've taken 'em clean by surprise—so far. What's our next move, Toby?"

Toby hesitated, though he knew that both Sam and Gabriel had framed his answer in advance "I think we should strike first—if we can find the buzzard in time"

"Fair enough," said Sam calmly "I'll roll out the kegs. Mind that powder train, Gabe, it's got to stay dry for quite awhile"

Toby jumped ashore, to test the solidity of the gentle shoal where they had grounded "Do we dare work here?"

"You won't find a better place this side of Cabbage Island." Sam was already busily testing a cat's cradle woven of stout bowline Now he spread this impromptu receptacle wide as Gabriel hefted a powder keg and lowered it into the skein "Don't worry about those tardy apes we left in Muskrat Town Rain or no rain, you'll hear their hoofs in time"

They worked in silence for a while, a well-rehearsed trio

that knew its job and the parts each must play. The spar torpedo, as it emerged under their busy hands, was simple enough Projecting a good ten feet beyond the sloop's long, raked bowsprit, the extra mast was braced with copper wire tied firmly to both of the vessel's guy ropes. The two powder kegs, each nested snugly in its own cat's cradle, were lashed, in turn, at the very tip of the spar, the pole itself was secured in another skein of ropes—tightly enough to hold it in place, loosely enough to permit it to be drawn back into the cockpit while the sloop was under way The powder train came next The most ticklish detail of what might, after all, prove only a harebrained scheme, it needed several false starts before Sam was convinced that it was snaked securely about the pole

"Suppose we ship a heavy sea when we're running in?"

"The burlap will keep the fuse dry, I hope."

Gabriel, knee-deep in the brackish river, ran his fingers lovingly along the neatly twisted contours of the train. "It's a thing of beauty, Sam Just don't let it backfire"

Toby waded out to test the powder train in turn Jammed firmly into the bunghole of one of the kegs, the burlap casing seemed watertight, the actual line of powder within—he could feel it grate under his fingers as he pinched the fabric gently—was perhaps as thick as one's little finger, and packed just tightly enough to make chain combustion certain once it was ignited from the cockpit.

"The kegs will dip under if we sail close hauled"

"They're copperplated, both of 'em," said Sam Even in the faint starlight Toby could see the black smudges of gunpowder on the overseer's cheek—an aftermath of his careful testing along the train. "When we shove off, we haul 'em in just behind the bowsprit housing They'll stand whatever drenching they get from there."

"Then isn't it time we got under way?"

"High time," said the overseer "Somehow, I didn't count on doing this part of the job by touch alone"

"How far is Cabbage Island?"

"Not more than a half-mile down river We'll know where we stand by midnight, with any luck at all"

Again they moved in silence, to clear the sloop from its overhang of island jungle With both Gabriel and Sam in the stern sheets, Toby was relieved to note that the bow rose of its own accord from its sandy bed He leaped aboard after them with one vigorous shove Sam had caught the channel breeze almost before Toby could clear the gunwale They moved downstream again, smoothly enough, even now,

though the sloop was a bit sluggish in the head, thanks to the weight of those two fat kegs just under the bowsprit

"That's Cabbage Island, a point to port."

"Surely they'll have lookouts among the palmettoes"

"Maybe they're too confident for that. Once again we can only move in and pray"

They had spoken in whispers, even as they dropped, by instinct, into the panther crouch that had saved their lives more than once when they had ridden with the van of Darby's Rangers Peering through a notch in the port gunwale, Toby watched Cabbage Island take shape in the gloom, and waited tensely for the shots that did not come Even now he could see that the island, peppered with thick clumps of cabbage palms along its slow spine, would offer cover of a sort, if the corsair turned out to be anchored on its far side

"Wouldn't it be wiser to ground again and explore a bit?"

Sam shook his head "I'm guessing in earnest now, but I'd say our friends are anchored in a cove just inside the southern sandspit——" He bit the word in the middle, and held up a hand for silence The wind, slamming across the heads of the cabbage palms from the open sea just beyond, had brought a faint but unmistakable creaking to all their ears

"Maybe you should make a career of guessing, Sam," said Gabriel "If that wasn't someone's boom block, I'll turn in my seaman's license."

"Quiet!"

Again they strained their ears This time the sound brought by the wind across the island's narrowing tip was more sinister an oath or two, followed by a burst of drunken, belching laughter Sam grinned in the dark

"Somehow, I didn't think they'd be *that* careless Maybe this job won't be too risky, after all"

"Shall we go in now, and make sure?"

"Easy does it, Doc There's a nest of dunes just ahead—they'll make good cover"

"If she's that close, why can't we see her masts?"

"It's hard to see anything in this murk," said the overseer "You might say that's been our salvation, as of now And you can be glad you've a skipper who can steer by his nose"

"You may say that again, Captain," said Gabriel fervently "Now tell us if the spit's out of water"

"It's just coming clear," said Sam "Tide's been over two hours on the ebb, you know We could walk right up their bowsprit if we liked"

Two hours on the ebb Toby, still crouched in the shelter

of the cockpit housing, winced under the import of those words Unwarned by him, Captain Bronson was well under way by now, with the Darby Wharf already a good fifteen river miles astern He jolted back to the compulsion of the moment sharply enough as their keel sheared through loose sand, then held firm Sam Hoyt was already overside, noiseless as some plump but agile sea monster Toby followed quickly, and blessed the fact that there would be no more time for soul-searching.

"Hold her as she is, Gabe. This shouldn't take long"

The journalist, spread-eagled on the afterdeck with two grains poles crossed, nodded a silent acceptance of the order. Sam was a good hundred feet ahead when Toby emerged from the bone-chilling river Thanks to the wan white silhouettes of the dunes, it was possible to take one's bearings now A scant quarter-mile to the south the spit ended in a gentle boiling of surf from the open sea beyond the harbor bar Dead ahead the nest of dunes opened slightly, to let in a cluster of stars To the east, across the dunes' shoulder, they could hear the steady pound of surf along the open beaches, to the north of the river's mouth

"We must go to the top for a look see, Doc"

Halfway up the difficult slope they were sure of their quarry and his lack of ordinary precaution—the glow of fire was unmistakable, even at this angle, to say nothing of the mingling of hoarse curses, snatches of song, an argument that seemed to go on forever in a whining sing-song

"Can their whole watch be drunk?"

"Not too drunk to blast an easy target, I'm afraid"

They were creeping forward like snakes just below the crest of the highest dune—nursing each scrap of cover, still braced for the gunfire that did not come Only the ominous boom of surf, mingling with the less sinister whine of men's voices Toby could even pick out a snatch here and there He had the absurd conviction that he could touch these human vultures with his hand merely by swinging an arm through the thin screen of wire grass that fringed the dunes' summit

"So I said to the bo'sun, 'Why isn't it *my* turn to go ashore?' An' what do I get? The back of his hand, no less"

"When are those chowderheads showing their faces?"

"Quiet! They had orders to wait for word" The new voice had a certain authority, slapping the whiners into silence "How d'you know the ship will sail tonight?"

"How do we know she ain't sailin' now? While LeClerc and Dindon snore at the Bird in Hand, with a drab between 'em?"

A palm thudded against flesh, sharp as a pistol crack in the night, there was a scurry of boots on planking, a final explosion of oaths—then silence. Beside him Toby heard Sam draw a quiet breath of relief. Both of them had been sure enough of outdistancing the coasters still in Savannah; what they had just heard was proof positive of their success.

"We'll check his position," said Sam. "Then we'll ram him."

They parted the cover of saw grass. Staring down into the dim curve of the anchorage below, Toby sucked in his breath sharply at what he saw. The corsair was no skulking denizen of the marshes, as he had half-hoped. He saw instead a full-masted brig, complete with thick open gunports and a battery of nine-pounders fore and aft. Even in that uncertain light there was no doubting the dark enemy's striking power, or his purpose in lurking here. Or, finally, his almost contemptuous certainty that he would win this desperate game. There was evidence enough of that in the cook fire that smoldered at the ship's waist, in the snarling quarrels that had broken out along her rails, now that the man with the ready fist had gone elsewhere.

"Name her for me, Sam. I've seen that hull before."

"She's a French-rigged brig. Fast as they come, and as wicked."

Toby nodded soberly, as his worst suspicion was confirmed. He had seen more than one such fighting vessel in anchor along the Delaware wharves when he had worked as a surgeon in Philadelphia, in the last years of the war. Turned out by the dozens from French shipyards, these fast-stepping brigs had done their share to harass the British into surrender.

Evidently at least one had turned to less savory pursuits in peace time—thanks to Felix Pagnol's gold. He could hardly doubt the Pagnol-Nancy liaison now. Even the scouts in Muskrat Town had borne French names.

"If you ask me, Doc, we've seen more than enough."

He responded, to Sam's nudge without a word, and all but ran down the masked slope of the dune. Now that the climax of their venture was at hand, he was almost calm. The same uncanny ease had descended before, when he had operated under fire, with sabers clashing outside the surgeon's tent. Gabriel's hand closed at his elbow, easing him soundlessly into the cockpit again. Sam, back at his post like an automaton, was babying the tiller in an effort to set a course that would just skim the sand spit without grounding them.

"Blow up those coals, Gabe. This will be over sooner than we think."

"Shouldn't we run out the spar first?"

"Not until the last moment. That extra weight under the jib cuts down my control. As it is, I've got to come about like a dancing master—and almost as fast"

The dunes that had just sheltered them were racing past their port quarter. There, as they swung a bit deeper into the Wilmington's mouth, was the lazy tide rip, creaming about the meeting place of sand and sea. And there, at long last, was their enemy—visible in all sleek arrogance against the wide sea's face, his masts swaying easily as his anchor chains complained of the tugging tide.

"Stand by to come about"

"Ready as we'll ever be, skipper."

"This is my last order," said Sam, in that same matter-of-fact tone "You'll have to work on your own when I set my next tack If I have my way, that bowsprit will be dead on her waist If you have yours, those kegs will explode before she knows what clipped her."

A voice cut through his words—a peremptory hail, barked through a speaking trumpet from the deck of the brig The sloop ignored the challenge as the boom swung, and bore straight down on the enemy with the wind behind her. In a matter of moments now they would be within the pale half-circle of light cast by the cook fire amidships Crouched well forward, with both fists twined in the ropes that controlled the torpedo spar, Toby felt their hull quiver for an instant in the cross chop, then plunge forward like an arrow from the string of a master archer

"Luff, or we'll fire!"

"Too late, friends," roared Sam. "Fire away!"

A musket ball whistled through the mainsail, followed by a ragged volley Thanks to the element of surprise, the buccaneers had been caught quite unawares, and the adage that sailors are notoriously poor shots seemed amply justified A bullet splintered the gunwale a scant six inches from Toby's head as he spread-eagled on the foredeck beside Gabriel and helped the journalist to work the spar forward, but the other shots went wild, drawn by the huge, ghostly triangle of their sail

A good ten feet ahead of their bowsprit point the twin kegs skimmed the water, slowing their forward thrust a little without altering its deadly precision The dinghy mast creaked just once, and for an instant Toby was sure that it would crack beneath the weight of powder and fuse, but the copper guys held, though they complained dangerously of that downward pull

"Fire the fuse, Toby," said Sam, "or it'll be too late"

Toby had already lifted the lid of the stone pot and plunged

a spoon into its glowing heart Now, with both legs anchored to the dancing bowsprit, he slashed at the near end of the fuse with his clasp knife, spilling the coarse-grained gunpowder through the rent in the burlap. At the same moment the sloop roared into the fringe of light that outlined their target with such fatal convenience He heard Sam Hoyt curse for the first time as he began to lash the tiller and fouled a rope, he was dimly aware of Gabriel, beating a prudent retreat for the stern The bullets were thicker, though most of them still whistled harmlessly through the sail Thirty feet, twenty-five, twenty. Everything depended on his timing, his refusal to be rushed by Sam's burst of nerves.

"Fire her, Toby, for God's sake!"

A compulsion that went beyond thought or shouted hysteria lifted the spoon high Spray hissed among the blazing coals as the wind fanned them into brightness again. Half of the load was overside before he could dump the balance into the open burlap casing, the second before the powder smoked into combustion seemed a fair-sized eternity. Then, with a whooshing roar, the fuse caught in earnest, sparking like a comet gone berserk as the flame ran down the spar.

His nostrils caught the reek of burning burlap mingled with the acrid stench of gunpowder, and again blind instinct sent him tumbling into the cockpit and scrambling for the afterdeck in Gabriel's wake

The journalist went overside as he gained the after housing; he had a glimpse of slim, flashing shanks lost instantly in a welter of foam and blackness Sam, knotting the final lashing at the tiller, paused to grin at Toby briefly—his aplomb restored, now that the fuse had flamed into life.

"Skipper last, Toby Over you go"

He looked back just once before he followed Gabriel, letting the scene etch his memory for all time—the monstrous hulk of the corsair blotting the stars like some obscene roosting bird, the vicious spit of gunfire along her rail, the rumble of a gunport opening, a fraction too late, to blast this Nemesis from the water. Then he was overside in a long, raking dive—feather-kicking for distance as his body slapped the surface, sounding only when he heard Sam wallow after him

He clawed his way downward, deeper and ever deeper in chill, bubbling blackness, knowing, above all else, that he must put a cushion between his body and the crash to come A vast phosphorous whorl, not too far to his right, told him that Sam was taking similar precautions There was no sign of Gabriel, and he could only hope that the journalist, showing a fast pair of fins, had already darted beyond the danger point

Why was the explosion so long in coming? Had the fuse

sputtered out before it could reach the kegs? Or had the pirate slipped his cable and missed death by inches? Clawing ever deeper into Wassaw Sound, ignoring the danger signals that buzzed at his eardrums, Toby felt a chill that had nothing to do with the icy water. If their stratagem had failed at its climactic moment, they could expect small mercy when they broke surface The enemy, sitting on the brig's deck, with his own cook fires to show the way, could pick them off with ease long before they could swim out of musket range

And then it came, with the shattering roar he had hoped for—smashing his stomach to his vertebrae with a giant's mailed fist, all but bursting his lungs in its merciless pincers Even at fifteen feet he fancied that he heard the screech of rending timbers, the croaking of human vultures in agony Just in time he remembered to let the air bubble forth from a bursting chest before his lungs could crack within his body, and clawed back to the surface again with all his failing strength

Sam's head broke forth at the same instant that he gained the merciful air again, and despite their aching lungs, they burst into a concerted yell of triumph as a blazing timber, arched in a devil's parabola, smoked into the sound a scant fifty feet behind them. As for the corsair herself, she was already beyond hope even a landsman could hardly mistake the import of that jagged rent amidships, or the chain of racking explosions that splintered her decks from within as efficiently as though Beelzebub and his minions were making holiday below

"Straight on her waist," rejoiced Sam, in a bull-like roar. "Just where I aimed for"

"Her magazine will go in a moment now"

The second crashing detonation came as Toby spoke, splitting the pirate down his length as neatly as though an invisible cleaver had smashed down from the black dome of night. A wild, Roman-candle burst, with red flames licking at its corners—and a final cacophony of shrieks that chilled the two watchers to the marrow, even as they set their hearts against pity

"Swim for your life, Toby I hope we got 'em all, but you'll never be sure"

The burning brig—mushroomed, now, like a vast evil flower against the night—had already begun to founder Again Toby dared no more than a single backward glance as he sprinted after Sam's flailing limbs For all his bulk, the overseer swam with the alacrity of a porpoise Toby was panting in earnest when they reached a penumbra of safety, just beyond the death-dealing circle that still showered fire from its spouting center

"Where's Gabriel?"

The journalist's voice gave sepulchral answer from the darkness. "Ready to fish you from the briny, my friend. If you'll just swim this way."

A heavy timber punished Toby's shoulder. He sounded by instinct, and came up a cautious ten feet away, blinking incredulously at the silhouette of their sloop against the blaze beyond. Tipped on her beam ends, the little vessel had just brushed his shoulder with her mainsail boom. Gabriel, with both feet spread wide on the far gunwale, was rocking the mast in an effort to bring the waterlogged hull to an even keel.

"How did you get out of water so soon, Gabe?"

"Come up and help me," said Gabriel. "You can ask your questions later. Remember, we've a return journey to make, and I've a story that's crying to be set in type."

Sam was already aboard when Toby swarmed overside, testing the forward housing. Together they fell to bailing vigorously, before the boat could drift into that fire-pocked circle behind them. Thanks to the buckets lashed down beneath the transom seat, their progress was rapid. Gabriel, rocking happily on the high gunwale, was able to lift the wet mainsheet from the water in a matter of minutes.

"Will she float us, Sam?"

"Like a sweetheart. Only her bowsprit's gone. She'll handle without her jib, I think." Sam was already at the rudder, cutting his lashings away. As he had said, the sloop responded to her tiller readily enough, the main sheet, bullet-ridden though it was, and bearing a great, ragged hole near its peak when a burning timber had seared a passage, drew almost as well as before.

"Did you see it happen, Gabe?"

"Right from the water's edge, not two hundred yards away. She detonated not three minutes after you went overboard. Blew both kegs as neat as you please, and rocked back from her work like your grandmother on her own front veranda." The journalist chuckled at his bizarre simile. "Of course it was Sam's lashed tiller that saved us. That, and a stray puff of wind that spun her on her heel just as the bowsprit snapped."

Sam, foursquare as ever at the tiller, swung their course in a wide arc, to skirt the blazing horror behind them. "I knew that there was an outside chance she'd stay right side up. It seems luck was with us, even there."

Toby stared grimly at the subsiding blaze across the cross chop. Already, as they began to make westing and put the sandspit between them and their night's work, that deadly strike seemed to recede into the night, like a nightmare without form or meaning. Nothing about it was half so real as the

wet shirt against his back, or the deep comforting warmth of the brandy that Gabriel had just offered from his flask.

"As a doctor, I should insist we go back," he said through chattering teeth—and downed another swallow.

"As a Georgian, you know you did just right," said Sam. "Fire and brimstone's the best medicine for lice."

"At least that's one pirate that'll never sail again."

Gabriel, curled damply against the shattered housing, was staring into the starlit river. "If you ask me, gentlemen, we finished our job at the perfect time. Isn't that Captain Bronson bulling for the bar, looking as if he doesn't have a care in the world?"

Dunes and cabbage palms half-obscurred the view, but there was no mistaking the silhouette of the merchantman as she moved proudly down river on the last leg of her course to the open sea Toby ran forward for a better view, all but forgetting the missing bowsprit in his eagerness Watching the *Darby Belle* come about, to fetch the open sea lane beyond the last channel marker, he felt his heart lift above the dull hatred that had all but broken his spirit tonight

Sam voiced their sentiments as he pulled their battered sloop a point closer to the wind "If it weren't for those missing jibs, I'd escort her out. So help me, that's a sight worth drowning for."

"And killing for," said Gabriel "Something tells me our London shipping can move out for quite a while without taking guns aboard "

"Or faking a sailing order," said Sam "It was a risk worth taking, Doc Even if we never learn who informed them "

"Even if we never learn " Toby swore silently as he accepted Gabriel's flask and lifted it in a silent toast to the diminishing silhouette of the Darby flagship There was no need to explain his stratagem to Sam or Gabriel—or to brood on the fearful fruit it had borne Nancy Gregory's plotting had been nipped in its evil genesis—that was the important point. Revenge, from this moment on, would be strictly a private matter.

vi

The rain had begun again when they were still far down river, it was raining in earnest when they nosed into the covered wharf below the Savannah bluff, in that last black hour before the autumn dawn Climbing the ramp to The Bay, pausing just once to drain the last of Gabriel's armagnac brandy, Dr Tobias Kent was scarcely conscious of his wet skin or the nightmarish pattern of rain-plastered hair that had escaped its ribbon long before An avenging angel, lacking only the whir

of wings and thunderbolts, could hardly have stormed down the empty desolation of Bull Street with more fervor. Jehovah's own minion, burning with righteous wrath, could not have marched up the steps of Tondee's with a more determined tread.

Though he had never visited the Frenchman, he knew that Pagnol's rooms were on the first landing. Even before his fist closed on the knocker he knew, just as surely, that his summons would stir nothing but empty echoes. He burst open the door regardless, not even hearing the babble of protest his cyclonic entrance had aroused from the sleepy night watchman and the two waiters. He wanted the satisfaction of seeing, with his own eyes, that the Frenchman's lair was untenanted.

The parlor room of Tondee's best suite was shrouded in decorous darkness, but he heard a faint stirring in the bedroom beyond. Snatching the watchman's lantern, he staggered across the threshold, careless of the fact that he might well stop a bullet. For his first blind moment of fury he was sure that he had surprised Nancy in the Frenchman's bed. Then, as his head cleared a bit, he saw that it was only Pagnol's manservant, deep in amorous dalliance with Alice, one of Tondee's more buxom barmaids.

The doxy saw him first, and leaped from the bed with a full-bodied scream, revealing ample reasons for the valet's choice as she snatched at her clothes and fled. The valet himself sat up among the pillows and blinked at them sleepily—a spent cockerel, too puzzled at the moment to be afraid.

"Eveille-toi, garçon. Où est ton maître?"

"I do no wrong, gentleman—no wrong at all."

"Where's Captain Pagnol?"

"Monsieur le capitaine est parti." The valet, recovering a little of his poise as he stared back into the waiters' grinning faces, sought refuge in broken English. "It is not I who does wrong, *Monsieur le docteur*. To enter so—as you have done—is not the act of a gentleman."

But Toby's fist had already closed on the servant's nightshirt and lifted him bodily from his tangled nest of sheets. "Answer me! Was Pagnol in Savannah tonight?"

"Captain Pagnol is away from Savannah many months, Doctor. You must have heard as much."

Toby's lantern swept the room. There was nothing to suggest occupancy outside the tumbled bedclothes.

"Captain Pagnol says I may use this room as my own when he visits Philadelphia."

Toby dropped the manservant among his pillows, ignoring the rest of his babble. There was brandy on the side table in the other room. He snatched up a bottle, biting the cork as

he strode out, elbowing the protesting waiters from his path

On Bull Street again, reeling among the muddy wagon tracks, he found that he was singing between swallows—a tune of his youth, older than his Scotch forebears The same rollicking ballad that Martha Darby had strummed the night of the Filature ball—and Nancy herself had hummed as she dressed in the bedroom above:

> Again I am a bachelor, I live with my son
> We work at the weaver's trade,
> And every single time that I look into his eyes
> He reminds me of the fair young maid.

The fair young maid, like so many others, had been a strumpet born. Ripe for taking, feigning a modesty that would deceive no one—not even a Scotch weaver It was a rewarding thought to take back to the house on Wright Square. A thought that might still be translated into action though the night was all but spent.

> He reminds me of the wintertime,
> Part of the summer, too,
> And the many, many, times that I held 'er in me arms
> Just to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew!

He choked off the rest of the song as he turned into the square, approaching the Darby gateposts at last, he walked on elaborate tiptoe, pausing but once to curse a creak in the wooden sidewalk In the shadow of the portico he remembered to kick both water-logged boots into the garden. The tumblers of the front-door lock turned soundlessly under his key; the carpet of the foyer was gratefully soft under his bare damp toes Caroming, just once, against the curve of the balustrade, and groaning aloud as the wood splintered under his weight, he gained the upper landing on hands and knees, spilling most of Pagnol's brandy on the carpet

The house was silent as he rose. He held the bottle aloft, studying its contents against the night light at the far end of the hall and chortling his satisfaction when he noted that a good two inches of liquor remained He drank once to clear his spinning head while he groped in his memory for the location of Nancy's room Usually there was a chink of light beneath her door, no matter how late the hour. Returning from the clinic in the early morning, he had all but yielded to temptation a score of times, and paused to knock en route to his own bedroom It had touched him, and stirred him more than he cared to admit, to discover that Nancy, like himself, could sleep but little when the same rooftree sheltered them both.

Tonight when, and if, he could find her door, he would wrench it wide and denounce her at last If she were abed, so much the better It would give him added satisfaction to tear her from that warm nest when he ordered her into the rain.

He took a few unsteady steps down the hall, searching for a point of reference, now that he missed the familiar pencil of light across the carpet Five doors to left and right, marching away into darkness, like the dim-white portals of tombs. Nancy Gregory was sleeping—soundly, or fitfully—behind one of those ten doors Or waiting, too fearful to burn her candle, for his return from down river . . . The third from the left. He remembered, positively, that her door was the middle of five on that side as he faced down the hall Or was it third from the right? Left, of course, was the proper answer—the hand closest to the heart

To his surprise the door was just a bit ajar. He wrenched it wide and pitched, rather than walked, into the well of blackness within His hand touched, and clung to, a post of the bed before he could orient himself Moving by touch rather than sight, he found the night table and struck his tinder gun above the shaded candle.

There she lay, deep in sleep among her tumbled pillows, her breathing gentle as a child's. Only there was something out of key. . . . His fuddled brain stumbled as his eyes opened wide to the aureole of dark hair on the pillow, the reek of brandy that still hung above the sleeper in an all-but-visible cloud Too late he realized the naked shoulder, enticing as cream there in the candlelight, was Martha Darby's That it was Martha's lithe arms that embraced the bolster in a drunken stupor as she dreamed of an impossible lover who would never cool—and never tire

Thank Heaven there was no danger of waking her Martha's slumber was too profound to be broken by anything short of a thunderbolt He could even stumble to the water carafe that stood on her night table, douse his head thoroughly, and dry it on her chemise, in lieu of a towel It was obvious that she had dropped off here, with that wooden brandy decanter for company, while she waited for him to make his tardy rendezvous at her bedside. Just as obviously it would be unwise to rouse her now, even if his business across the hall could have waited

The hall door opened under his hand Swaying on the threshold of Martha's bedroom, he found Nancy's door instantly, directly across the wide, pale desert of carpet He wondered how he could have been stupid enough to avoid it, now that the chink of light was unmistakable where door and carpet joined Or had Nancy lighted her own candle in the last mo-

ment? Was she spying behind that panel, as she had spied behind her window, the night of the Filature?

With Martha's chemise still trailing in one fist, he weaved across the hall for his answer, just as Nancy's door swung wide Precisely as he had expected, Nancy herself stood just inside, with a dark cloak tossed over her negligee Something in her eyes anchored him to the hall, holding him speechless for the moment.

"Have you no shame? Or are you too drunk to care?"

His mind fumbled with her meaning, even as his hand fumbled with the knob of Martha's door. Glancing behind him, he saw what had just come into her line of vision—the open bed, the bottle beside the night light, the naked woman tumbled in sleep. Dimly, but clearly enough, he saw himself as Nancy had glimpsed him, in the act of reeling from a night of love with his partner's chemise still clutched in drunken fingers And he put back his head to roar with laughter, but no sound came.

"If I'm drunk, Nancy Gregory, I've my reasons."

"So I observe"

"You were spying on me, then?"

"Certainly not. Something you upset wakened me I lit my candle and came out to surprise a burglar" Her voice had grown more composed with each syllable, now, it fairly dripped ice "Instead, I discover Roy's best friend emerging from Roy's wife's bedroom"

He shouted in earnest, even as he slammed Martha's door behind him. "Go on, think the worst of me You always have"

"Never until you gave me reason!"

"May I say the same of you?" He was eye to eye with her now, feeling his head clear magically "And may I ask you to leave this house before I brand you for—what you are?"

Watching her reel under the words, he took grim pleasure in the blow he had struck, and struck again before she could recover.

"Do you deny that you've hated me from the start? That you've done all you could to ruin the company, and me?"

"I don't know what you're saying!"

"Then leave this house before I use your right name."

He drew in his breath sharply as Nancy Gregory lifted her chin and swept the cloak about her Even in this moment or renunciation she had never looked lovelier—or more desirable And, though he hated her with all his being, the urge to sweep her into his arms, to cover her pale cheeks with kisses, was more than he could endure He forced himself to shout in earnest before his resolution snapped

"Will you go by yourself—or must I escort you?"
"Would I stay another moment after what I've seen?"
As she spoke, she brushed past him in a rush. Still pinned to the spot by her blazing eyes, still cursing himself for letting her go without naming her crime, he watched her run down the kitchen stair, heard the clatter of her heels on the serving porch, and the crash of a closing door in the stable He had driven her from the field precisely as he had planned. She was riding back to her lair at Sangaree, through the rainy dawn. Why when his victory was complete did he writhe in the grip of the greatest frustration he had ever known?
He was still pondering the question as he stood at the fan-light in the upper hall and watched her canter away in the rain, with the train of her cloak flung like an angry pennon in the breeze. Lifting the last of Pagnol's brandy to his lips, he drank deep to wash that bitter enigma away. Knowing, just as surely, that he would never sleep again, though past and future were mercifully blotted from his mind almost before he could reel to his room and pitch, head foremost, into his bed.

vii

He had expected the morning to be an unending void, the week that followed a wide-eyed nightmare He had told himself that he could never enter the Darby office block again, and face her empty desk, without cursing his stratagem and its inevitable finale Actually, he found the next days all but bearable, thanks to the pressure of work that gave him no time to think Thanks, most of all, to the endless detail—most of which Nancy had lifted from his shoulders
In all that bustling week he missed her every moment But it was only when he closed his office door, when he turned aside from the last ward bed in the Darby clinic, that his need for her revived in earnest He was rarely sober after dark—and rarely alone after midnight, thanks to the companionship that Gabriel provided at the Bird in Hand
Throughout he could rejoice in two facts he had not betrayed Nancy, nor had he mentioned his conviction of Nancy's guilt, even when he was deepest in his cups Martha, who certainly would have gossiped, had gone on a mysterious visit to Charleston, which permitted him to live on at Wright Square with honor, though he was rarely in his room these autumn evenings, preferring to grope his way to work from his current bed in Muskrat Town Roy was due from London on the next packet, and Roy's presence would restore a surface decorum to his life Or so he reasoned, while he pounded his

tired brain at a desk that was now mountain-high with unfinished work, and fumbled for a way of life that could not include Nancy Gregory—a way of life he could follow alone—and an explanation that would satisfy Nancy's brother when they met again.

He was hardly surprised to learn that Roy was not aboard when the British packet dropped anchor below the bluff It was only natural that Roy should leave the ship at Sangaree, for a brotherly visit. Natural, too, he added dourly, that Nancy should have the first opportunity to explain her departure from Savannah He was totally unprepared for Roy's hurried entrance a few hours later, his quick dismissal of greetings, his first haggard question

"Why'd you let Bristol take the case?"

"What case?"

"Surely you know that Nancy's ill."

"I give you my word——"

But Roy was not pausing for details "Desperately ill, in fact I've already sent Maum Bonnie down river from the clinic."

"Tell this from the start, can't you? I haven't seen Nancy in a week."

"It's true that you quarreled, then?"

"Is that what she told you?"

"She told me nothing, Toby. At the moment, she's out of her head."

Toby felt his heart plummet; he paced his office quickly, avoiding Roy's accusing eyes as he strove to pull his thoughts together. "Did you examine her?"

"Naturally, since she's been in that hog butcher's care."

"For God's sake, Roy, what are the facts?"

"A textbook case of abscess in the *ōs mastoideum* Bristol, the fool, diagnosed a mild inflammation of the inner ear, prescribed Dover's Powder, and left her to sleep it off."

"When did it begin?"

"The day after she returned to Sangaree. She rode up to the portico that morning, soaked to the bone I had that much from the slaves, before I——" Roy bit the sentence in the middle and flushed "I was about to add, before I began damning *you* Why'd you pick this time to quarrel?"

Toby did not answer for a long moment. His mind was crowded with one compelling picture—the way her eyes had blazed when she turned her back on Savannah and the Darby Company and cantered into the downpour He had driven her to that retreat quite deliberately, no amount of self-righteousness could wipe that fact away.

"She won't have me in her house, Roy," he said at last. "Not even to save her life"

"And I'm telling you that nothing can save her but excision of the mastoid bone. An operation I'll trust no one but you to perform"

"Bristol himself will refuse us entry."

"He can't. I'm her brother, and I've the right to demand a consultation And to insist that you operate, if need be Damn Bristol! Would you let him stop you, if it meant saving a life?"

Silence clamped on the office as Toby paced with the problem that had been tossed at his head with such nightmare abruptness "You examined her thoroughly?"

"Enough to be positive of my diagnosis Bristol was out of the house, thank Heaven; he'll be there when we return."

"Are you familiar with the operation you're asking me to perform, Roy?"

"Petit trephined behind the ear fifty years ago, and the patient recovered I've watched you excise that same *os mastoideum* at Edinburgh"

"Are you aware of the risk?"

"I'm aware that Nancy will die if you don't operate. You'll agree, when you've examined her"

"So you take it for granted I'll come to Sangaree"

"Billy's saddling our horses now. Walter Appleby's laying out an instrument kit What are we waiting for?"

"What, indeed?" But Toby's mind had steadied mightily, even before he picked up Roy's challenge Here—when he had least expected it—was deliverance of a sort Or was expiation a better word?

"We'll have a battle royal with old Bristol."

"I'm looking forward to that battle, Toby—and so are you."

"Could we bring her in to the hospital?"

"Nothing could finish her faster in this weather"

Toby went through his office door without another word, unaware of the worried staring of the clerks Roy tossed a greatcoat about his shoulders The horses, already steaming in the raw November afternoon, shivered under their blankets in the depot porch He took the salutes of the grooms with unseeing eyes, and splashed through the puddles in the road to gain the hospital dispensary across the way His mind, deep in the problem ahead, had already closed itself to externals.

Roy's loyalty to his skill, however well-meant, would receive its greatest test tonight should it really prove necessary to open the mastoid bone

He remembered the anatomy of that area far too precisely for comfort To Roy's non-surgical mind, excision of the

os mastoideum was little more than a simple, if delicate, trephining of the skull. Toby's own background told him that the operation was far more dangerous The mastoid was not like ordinary bony surface. Thick, soft, honey-combed with air spaces that connected with the ear structure itself, it could be treacherous as sponge under the surgeon's steel A wrong move could deafen an ear for all time. A single too-deep stroke of the trephine button could smash through to the network of veins beneath the thin inner cortex. Hemorrhage, all but impossible to control in that area, could end the operation before it began

Toby did not dwell on such imponderables as they checked the surgical kit Appleby had assembled The trephines, blunt-ended drills turned by a cunningly curved handle, came into his hands like old friends, they had saved more than one life in the war, along with the forceps and scalpels that would accompany them to Sangaree Closing the kit and buttoning it into his saddlebag, he offered a short prayer for his patient's sake From this point on, he insisted, she was just another patient. To think of her as Nancy Gregory would pull his tension to the breaking point

Perhaps Bristol had been right, for once. Perhaps this was only an intermittent fever, brought on by exposure, and centering its malign attack in the eardrum Like so many of these coastal agues, it might well be past its crisis now But he knew, even before he could fit boot to stirrup, that such hopes were useless Roy might lack the surgeon's logic, but his diagnoses were almost always accurate.

Appleby spoke eagerly, pulling him out of his reverie. "I'd be glad to come too, if you like "

"Your work is here, Walter Maum Bonnie will be ready for us when we arrive I'm taking Billy for insurance only."

"Perhaps Dr Bristol will assist "

Roy laughed bitterly. "Wait till you've lived a bit longer in Savannah, my boy "

They rode away from the depot on that, with the two surgeons setting the pace, and Billy, muffled in an old army cape, clattering behind them on a mule Wrapped in a tighter cloak of his own—an automatic mental block that closed him in his own arcanum, Toby remembered but little of that ride, though it was harrowing enough Occasionally he raised his eyes to sweep the weary green plain of the marshlands, flattened by high water and the keening wind, now and again he shivered, despite his inner absorption, under the gnawing cold For the most part, his mind was deep in a textbook of anatomy, outlining the battlefield he had chosen—and weighing his chances of success

Their hoofs rattled on the Sangaree bridge as the pale day waned in an angry rain-streaked sunset Crashing up the long driveway at a hard gallop, he forgot Roy for the moment, and all but flung himself across the horse's head with the tossed reins, in his eagerness to survey that battlefield at firsthand

Sangaree, a grave white goddess even now, received them quietly as Rex bowed them into the tall white cave of the central hall Sangaree, in the dun-colored edge of the evening, was more unreal to Dr Tobias Kent than a stage-setting into which he had blundered while intent on another calling He dropped his soaked greatcoat where he stood, and tossed his waistcoat after it

"Take the bags upstairs, Billy. Our patient should be ready "

No one stirred for a moment Billy, held by the butler's inquiring eyes, tossed the saddlebags across the newel post.

"Dr Bristol is with Miss Nancy now," said Rex.

Roy almost smiled at Toby's blank stare "Had you forgotten there's a physician in attendance? So had I."

"Must I see him—or will you?"

"Let's both give ourselves the pleasure "

They went up the stair side by side, with Billy and Sangaree's puzzled major-domo three correct steps behind.

"Will the gentlemen take a toddy?"

"Thank you, Rex, it wouldn't come amiss "

Roy led the way into a kind of upstairs morning room Neither of them spoke while they waited for the butler to bring the drinks, though both acknowledged that they were glad of the breather Bristol's presence in the house seemed to loom above them, as palpable as the rain cloud that had begun to rise from the west with the angry sunset

"What if he refuses to leave?"

Roy patted a pocket in his coat "I've a derringer here, just in case It'd give me great pleasure to use it "

Toby breathed deep, what he must say now would take a real effort.

"Believe me, I'd have been here from the start If she'd sent for me—even if I'd known——"

"You're here now That's all I care about Pray it isn't too late " They accepted glasses from Rex's tray, bowed to each other in a silent toast Then, still side by side, they marched down the hall to face Matthew Bristol

Maum Bonnie opened the door of Nancy's bedroom, her mahogany-brown face a study in composure under her spotless turban Toby's eyes darted instantly to Nancy, still as a marble statue in the bed, her dark-red hair a flame of color against the massed pillows Even from the doorway he could

see that her lips were moving in an endless whispering as her fingers plucked at the counterpane It was a classic pattern of illness in its final stage he could hardly blame old Bristol for canceling all chances of a favorable outcome.

"May I ask the meaning of this?"

Toby pulled up sharp, with one foot already on the dais of the bed. His ancient enemy stood comfortably before the fire in the hearth. Warming his massive hocks, scowling at the intruders with Jovian disdain, he resembled a slightly mangy lion at bay

"I'd heard you were both in the house. But I could not believe my ears"

Despite the need for haste, Toby choked back the obvious retort and waited for Roy to speak Medical ethics were still to the fore, even now—to say nothing of Roy's failure in Savannah and his own

"You've also heard that I asked for a consultation, Dr. Bristol" Roy's tone was steady enough. "Surely you can't refuse my wish"

"Examine her yourself, if you insist. You'll find it's a bit late for consultations."

"I demand one, nonetheless It's still possible that an operation can save my sister."

"An operation which Kent would perform?"

"Precisely"

"Even when I tell you she's beyond hope?"

"I'd like another opinion on that."

The Jovian shoulders lifted "Suit yourself on that, Roy. If this fellow stays in the room another instant, I resign the case"

Silence, at that moment, was the perfect answer No one stirred as Bristol opened his watch—though Maum Bonnie let out a sigh of pure relief as he stumped to the bed table and swept his medical kit into his saddlebag

"Naturally, I must warn you that I took this case in good faith I was your father's physician for years Though your poor sister is almost *in extremis,* I leave her bedside under protest."

"At my order, you mean, because you refuse to consult"

Bristol's dewlaps turned cherry red "I don't consult with quacks. You're determined to let him operate?"

"Quite determined"

"Then I must warn you further, Roy If Nancy dies, I shall swear out a writ to deprive you both of your licenses."

"May I say we're prepared for that?"

"Allow me to finish, please I shall also inform the Academy of Medicine of this fellow's action I shall permit it to be

known that he drove Nancy into the rain a week ago—a reckless act of drunkenness that resulted in this illness——" He tried to go on, but Toby's fist was already at his coat collar, twisting his stock in a manner to discourage speech

"Will you leave this room quietly, or must I bounce you downstairs step by step?"

"Are you denying it?"

"*Quietly,* I said!"

Bristol shook off his hand, with his porcine dignity intact. "I shall also remember that you threatened me," he said, and left the room without quite meeting Roy's eyes.

"Shall we proceed, Dr Darby?"

"By all means, Dr. Kent"

They moved to the bed as a team, ignoring the echo of Bristol's exit. Roy said only, "I didn't think he'd resign so easily"

"Men like Matthew Bristol are like snapping turtles They never really resign—not even when it thunders. We'll have to break him later, if he doesn't break us first"

There was no time for more as they bent above their patient For the last time that day Toby blessed the training that could banish externals instantly—including his own red burst of rage

The skin of Nancy's wrist was burning hot against Toby's palm, her pulse was full and hurried, with none of the thready beat that was an infallible warning of disaster. Roy, doing his own count across the bed, showed his relief instantly

"Beyond hope, the bastard said!"

"She's holding her own, and more"

Toby nodded a solemn agreement Thanks to a healthy body, and the will to live, Nancy could yet be saved—if surgery could save her

Moving the hair gently from her left ear, he studied the operative area carefully The swelling, he saw, was below and behind the lobe, rather than of the ear itself—a trickle of whitish drainage had escaped from the canal and spotted the pillow where she lay He studied the discharge carefully. It was a favorable sign that the inflammation itself was discharging in this fashion, though he knew it would probably be impossible to drain adequately from the ear alone

"We must attack through the mastoid. There's no other approach now"

His testing fingers proved the point even as he spoke The skin behind the ear was red and distended almost to the bursting point Nancy moaned, and tossed her head at the slightest increase in his pressure

"Would you say the distention has increased since morning?"

"Definitely, I'm afraid."

"At least it means the pus is working its way outward—and not toward the brain. If we go in at once, we can save her"

"Billy is bringing your instruments now. What more will you require?"

"Bonnie knows what we'll need."

"Two boilin' kittles," said the Negress "Stacks of bed sheets Irons, to keep 'em warm Candle sconces——"

"Rex will help you," said Roy. "Come, I'll show you the way If Dr. Kent will watch over the patient——" He hurried into the hall without waiting for Toby's answer, hustling Maum Bonnie before him

It was the moment Toby dreaded most—the instant alone with the woman who had betrayed him so casually The moment when he must pause and think With no conscious volition he found that he had settled beside the bed and taken her hand Like a child's, her fingers curled about his Thanks to that deep coma, she was conscious only of a comforting touch, not of its origin. It was strange enough that he should be here today, and stranger still that he could sit for these few seconds of spurious contentment with her hand in his

Strangest of all, she was in his power tonight, as she had never been Unable to save herself for once, her life depended on his skill, the correctness of his decisions, his sheer daring.

Again without conscious thought, he found that he had bent forward to press a kiss within her palm To assure her, from the depths of his burdened heart, that he would do his utmost to save her life tonight, no matter how often she betrayed him.

viii

Forty minutes later, staring down at the circle of freshly shaved skin behind Nancy's ear, he waited for the last candle sconce to be placed, the last instrument to be sorted on the side table Roy's hands, he noted, were more than competent at the latter task Maum Bonnie, looming like a black monolith at the headboard, had already fastened the patient's head in her familiar vise-like grip. Billy, sprawled expertly at the footboard, had exerted similar pressure at the patient's knees From this point on he would think of Nancy as another patient, never as the woman he loved Never in this world as a girl who had tortured him once beyond all goading.

"You may begin when ready, Doctor"

He flashed a quick smile at Roy How often had those

same words been spoken across their special world, with life hanging in the balance between them?

"I'm aware of that, Doctor."

"Steady, Bonnie! We're going in."

The spread of black fingers turned the patient's head, exposing the mastoid to the waiting steel. The first stroke, as always, was the only mental block In his mind, he gave silent thanks that Nancy's deep coma would never let her feel the burning pain of the knife or the grind of trephine against bone.

"Compress, please"

Roy's fingers moved behind his own, applying the brown-linen pledgets deftly He was cutting like a veteran now, closing his ears to the girl's soft moans, confident that Maum Bonnie's hands would prevent an automatic spasm. The blade swung down and around, until it had severed skin and tissue for a distance of two inches—roughly, a finger's breadth back of the ear, and down toward the tip of the *os mastoideum.*

"We must control bleeding by pressure. There's no other way in this area."

As the skin parted, along with the swollen tissue beneath, he noted the pale, jelly-like appearance of the wound—starred, instantly, with spots of blood, like red polka dots on a colorless background Roy's compresses, firmly applied, stanched these tiny geysers instantly, permitting them to clot under pressure Toby was sure that he had avoided any larger vessel so far He could ill afford to pause and clamp in this tender area as he ventured downward toward the bone

"The skin tone seems healthy, now it's relieved by incision"

"True enough So does this bone structure The trouble is surely within the *os mastoideum,* in the middle space"

One thing had been accomplished, he noted—whether from the combined pressure of their fingers, or from Nancy's small struggle against the steel, as the pain reached her half-unconscious brain. The discharge from the ear itself had increased. it was flowing in a slow stream now, directly from the canal, and soaking the compress that Roy had placed beside Nancy's cheek Obviously the connection was open still within the ear itself, an excellent augury for post-operative care

Removing the pledgets from the wound, Toby took up a flat metal instrument with a sharpened end With it, he scraped the edges of the operative area, baring a greater bone surface as he moved deeper.

"How much will you expose?"

"Two square inches should do Will you separate the edges?"

Fresh compresses came into the incision, spread in Roy's

capable fingers. Thanks to this new pressure, a two-inch square was now opened on the white curve of the mastoid itself. Here was the moment he had visualized most sharply —and dreaded most But he was past even the smallest hesitation now as he took up the broadest and bluntest of his three trephines The instrument fitted his palm smoothly, its handle worn with use, its burred-steel circle just sharp enough for his initial entry. Cutting slowly, it would be less liable to ruin his chances by damaging a vital structure beneath.

"Steady, Bonnie!"

With burr on bone he gave the first twist of the handle The toothed circle began its work instantly, piling a white rim of bone dust along its edges as it wore away the outer layer. He turned the handle steadily; a slow tempo was essential to success The skull bones, he knew, were generally in two layers—plus a dangerous mid-section, much softer in texture, which held the blood vessels that fed the area. The outer layer, or table, was hard as human bone could be, the middle treacherous; the inner often wafer thin But the region of the *os mastoideum* was even more treacherous

Here—and he could see the detailed cross section in his anatomy textbook as clearly as though the volume were propped open on Nancy's pillow—the bone was far thicker, especially in the so-called middle region Honeycombed with those unpredictable air spaces, which connected with the ear itself, and soaked up its infections like a complaisant sponge, the mastoid was a danger spot in every sense If his diagnosis was correct, there would be pus in that bony honeycomb—pockets of potential death far more extensive than the still-suppurating ear itself could drain away.

At least the formation of pus was a hopeful sign Pus, at this stage of inflammation, showed that the trouble had tended to settle within the area rather than spread wider. The danger lay in the fact that this same troublemaker would soon tend to fill up the air spaces of the mastoid and accumulate under pressure. Then, as it so often did, it could begin its deadly migration toward the deeper, thinner bone that lay just over the brain. Once it had broken into the great blood spaces of that region there could be but one outcome

He removed the trephine and flicked the bone dust from the cup-shaped depression he had created. There was no sign that he had penetrated the outer table; the bottom of the cup was still smooth and rock-firm beneath his testing fingers. Fitting the trephine precisely in the cup, he began a deeper, more insistent penetration—and resisted, once again, the temptation to use a sharper burr

Five slow, agonizing minutes of steady turning brought no

real change in the operational pattern; with each grinding revolution of the handle he paused and waited, with taut nerves, for the sudden plunge of the burr, the spout of blood that would spell disaster Another slow turn, another prayer.

Was the texture of the bone dust changing under that steady pressure? For the fifth time in as many minutes he lifted the trephine and cleared the cup to its depths. His heart jumped at what he saw

To the layman's eye, the deep, even-funneled depression in the skull was unchanged Only the surgeon's alert glance would have noted the tiny, almost-invisible ooze at the very bottom of the cup—a whitish, creamy substance that all but blended with the pure-white texture of the surrounding bone.

"Isn't that pus, Toby?"

His eyes met Roy's, pleased that the other doctor had made the same hopeful guess Another drop oozed through the as-yet-invisible crevice in the bone as Roy spoke—and yet another. Toby pulled back from the operative field as the pledget darted deep in the cup, emerging instantly with the precise evidence they were seeking

"It's pus, and nothing else. You've broken through!"

"Let's not be sure until we've enlarged the opening" But he could not quite kill the elation in his tone as he returned to his task

The first bite of the trephine had a different feel now, he was positive that the bone under that searching burr had another, softer texture Even the pile of dust about the cup confirmed his hopes, the blood flecks there all but answered his question in advance

"We must go deeper," he said, reproving his own eagerness But not too deep, he added silently He was acutely aware that not more than a quarter-inch below that steel was a throbbing brain, ready to hemorrhage at the slightest flick

The edge of the trephine caught and held. He applied extra pressure to free it, but in vain I've touched the inner bone, he exulted, and released all pressure instantly, signaling to Roy as he let the trephine handle fall against his palm The next few seconds were an eternity as they waited for the gush of blood that would spell Nancy's doom Even now he could not be sure that he had escaped cracking the inner bone, that the burr had missed penetrating to the vein-filled sinus beneath.

"Compress ready?"

"Ready and waiting, Doctor."

He lifted the trephine at last, clearing the deep-funneled opening it had made The result was instantaneous, and far above his wildest hopes Even before steel could lift clear of

bone, the cup was filled to overflowing with whitish pus—a virulent discharge that changed rapidly from white to straw-yellow as Roy's compresses dipped and filled, and dipped again.

"You've done it, Toby, you've opened the mastoid bone."

He nodded soberly, willing to concede his good fortune now. This was precisely as Petit had described his own pioneer operation—a sudden plunge of the trephine before it anchored against the thin inner bone, a gush of foul-smelling pus at the opening . . . He breathed above the wound for that final confirmation. The odor emanating from the discharge was precisely described

"I think we can enlarge at will, Roy."

"Isn't this drainage sufficient?"

"Not in that honeycomb bone There'll be other pockets"

He could understand Roy's reluctance to explore farther as the deep-drilled funnel continued to suppurate But he knew, even before Billy could hold a candle sconce above the wound, that the operation was not yet ended

At first it was difficult to check in detail The expanded depths of the cup seemed a many-mouthed cave, spouting its deadly contents upward, he waited, contentedly enough, while Roy swabbed away the last of this orignal discharge with a half-dozen fresh pledgets Now he could see that the bottom of their funnel resembled a ragged honeycomb, with a portion of the comb scooped away From this starting point chisel and trephine could move almost at will—measuring the depth of their strokes precisely, until the *os mastoideum* was no more

"Must you excise the entire bone?"

"It may not be necessary We'll tell as we proceed"

"How much can she take?"

"Her pulse is still steady, thank God"

Maum Bonnie spoke, for the first time since the start of the operation. "Miss Nancy, she sleep sound You do what you like, Mist' Toby. This girl's body right glad when it ovah"

Toby permitted himself to grin briefly at Roy There was a wealth of earthy wisdom in the black midwife's words. Obviously it would not be necessary to explore the entire mastoid area in search of other pockets, the combination of luck and skill, that had placed his initial penetration at the precise spot where it could relieve pressure most directly, could conspire in their favor from now on Working in a slow, widening circle from this first funnel, he would merely test the surrounding honeycomb for danger signs When the forceps spanned a circle of healthy bone, he could withdraw with a clear conscience—and resign the battle to Nancy.

"The principal ooze issues from the side toward the ear," said Roy.

"We'll begin our second trephine there."

The exploring burr, biting home with real confidence now, uncovered a second, smaller pocket almost at once, and then a third, high up toward the curve of the ear itself. Supplementing the trephine with a small, sharp-edged chisel, clearing the bone chips with all the dexterity of a sculptor who knows his final pattern, Toby enlarged the second opening until it was only an extension of the original funnel. Drainage, as before, was copious and continual. He watched Roy's eyes as they counted the stack of soaked compresses on the side table: had they been fresh-minted sovereigns, he could hardly have dwelt on those yellow disks more lovingly.

"Surely you've explored enough, Toby."

"We'll try the lower edge, to be sure."

The burr touched briefly at the edge of the circle farthest from the ear. He found one minute pocket, not more than a quarter-inch from his original point of entry. Otherwise, the bone seemed quite sound. A final exploration, at their second trephine, told him that this sector was clean as well.

"Drainage established, Doctor. You may place your compresses."

Now that the tension was over, he swayed a little as he drew back from the bed. Twin candle sconces, framing the cheval glass across the room, gave him back a face gray as the dusk outside the windows, deep-lined with an exhaustion that went beyond mere bodily fatigue. He steadied himself with a hand at a bedpost and watched, with quiet satisfaction, while Roy fluffed out his compresses and packed the wound loosely.

Maum Bonnie spoke softly, with her eyes on the patient. "She sleep like a chile, Doctuh, now you really help her."

For the first time since he had taken up the scalpel he permitted himself to look directly at Nancy. What Maum Bonnie had said was true enough: she was sleeping almost naturally now, with quiet lips and hands. Of course much of this sudden relaxation was due to the release of pressure on the ear itself. Their final answer would come in a matter of hours—perhaps by morning. If the coma broke in earnest, if the burning fever receded, he could dare to hope for success.

Roy, working at gleeful speed, had almost finished the bandaging. The compresses, Toby noted, were placed expertly: filling the wound, placed just tightly enough to complete the deep-placed drainage, they were now held in place by an elaborate turban bandage, which gave Nancy the appearance of a brand-new mummy. Maum Bonnie rose from her place at Roy's nod and began to replace the bedclothes with the newly

warmed sheets beside the hearth A few flannel-wrapped bricks, placed at Nancy's feet and renewed during the night, would keep the bed temperature constant.

There was nothing more for the surgeon to do in the sick-room now. But he continued to linger, as he searched his tired brain for some final necessary check

"You'll sit with her till morning, Bonnie?"

"Bonnie and I will spell each other," said Roy. "Don't you think *you've* earned a little rest?"

"I'll take the last four hours"

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Roy firmly. "You'll take the next twelve hours on your back, in the master bed-room Rex is waiting outside now, to show you the way Or if you'd like a bite of supper first, the cloth is already spread in the library."

"What's the time?"

"It's nearly nine," said Roy. "And if you'll forgive me for mentioning it, Toby, I've never seen you look so tired To-morrow I'll thank you—as you deserve to be thanked. You probably wouldn't remember the words if I spoke them now."

"Perhaps you're right at that."

His exit from Nancy's bedchamber was a blind anticlimax, though he had planned it otherwise He did not even pause to glance at the bed again.

Nancy was in expert hands; he had done all that was in his power to save her

"Will you sup now, Doctor, or would you prefer to rest awhile?"

He blinked at Nancy's major-domo, realizing that he had descended the stairway with Rex's hand beneath his elbow, that the butler had already guided him through the open mahogany panels that gave to the library With that realization came another, more disturbing awakening The last words he had spoken to Nancy Gregory had been all but shouted in this same room The discovery of her double-dealing had taken place at that same tall *secrétaire* Roy, of course, could have no knowledge of that quarrel—much less of the appalling evidence that Toby had found between that row of bound diaries in the bookshelf. Yet why had Roy chosen to order a supper cloth laid beside this small, cheerful fire, under the eyes of the Founder's painted likeness? Why had he all but insisted that Toby settle here awhile before he slept?

And then he had his answer there on the white supper cloth The final volume from that same leaded bookshelf, face down and waiting to lure the casual eye—the same volume that Nancy herself had invited him to peruse that bitter spring

morning. Even in the fog of his weariness he could afford to smile a little at Roy's naiveté

"Why did you bring me here, Rex?"

It was the major-domo's turn to blink. "Dr. Roy suggested it, sir."

"Is it customary to sup in the library?"

"Miss Nancy takes all her meals here, Doctor. It's pleasanter than the main dining room when one eats alone"

"So I perceive." Toby had already settled on the wide horsehair divan, with his mind made up. *If this is a trap,* he thought, *I'll walk into it blind. . . .*

"May I bring you a pilaf, sir? Or a pigeon pie? Or a cold breast of guinea hen?"

"The fowl will do nicely."

"Claret, Doctor? Or white burgundy? I've a Montrachet that the old gentleman himself laid away, when our cellars were first dug."

Their eyes strayed in unison to Gilbert Stuart's debonair likeness of the Darby Company's founder: Old Victor's own eyes seemed to beam tonight, as though the portrait were lighted with some inner wisdom of its own. *You've planned this well,* thought Toby. *All of you have planned this to perfection Unfortunately, you've forgotten the human equation involved.*

Aloud he said only, "Montrachet is perfect, Rex. I'll rest here while I wait for it."

He did not take up the book at once, though the temptation was great enough. Instead, he stared up at Old Victor for a long, blank moment—and fought his whirling drowsiness even as he asked pardon of his benefactor's ghost. It was easy to imagine that the Founder hovered above him now, with anxious questions on his lips . . . He came back to the presence at his elbow just as his eyelids lowered drowsily. Rex had returned with a vast silver platter of guinea hen and a long, dark bottle

"It's been chilled in the spring, sir," said the major-domo as he poured the wine "I hope, it's to your taste."

"I hope I'm not too tired for appreciation. It looks a noble wine."

It was, in point of fact, amazing burgundy—even for a Montrachet He could feel his head clearing with the first sip. When the major-domo had poured his second glass, he was almost ready for the final volume of Victor Darby's journal. With the third glass—and a juicy second joint gnawed to the bone—he could even feel that he might survive what he read there

"I'll manage the rest, Rex"

"As you wish, sir. Will you take coffee and cognac? Or a glass of curaçao?"

"Nothing, thank you. I'll read a bit, and doze a bit more, while I wait for Dr. Darby"

The diary was open before him as Rex went out into the hall. Watching the major-domo pull the mahogany panels snug, he could afford to smile. Roy, at least, would receive the report he was waiting for at Nancy's bedside.

Toby had expected a mild shock at his first glimpse of Old Victor's writing. Actually, those bold, heavily accented pen strokes were as familiar to him as old friends—and as soothing He had read that script a hundred times under fire and in bivouac. It seemed quite natural to be reading it once again, at Victor's own hearth, in the benign shadow of his portrait:

> Civilizations, even as man himself, are born only to die—or so say the cynics in our midst Governments—(which, after all, are only instruments devised by mankind to curb his own atavistic greed)—are likewise doomed to self-corruption and decay—or so the same misanthropes remind us, as they turn History's cruel and musty pages. . . .

Yes, it was familiar wisdom; Victor Darby might almost have spoken those words aloud He turned the stiff foolscap page—a bit startled to find that the diary ended on the following sheet He filled his glass and sipped thoughtfully before he read on, his eyes straying to the file of similar volumes behind the leaded glass of the *secrétaire.*

THE RANDOM PAPERS
OF
VICTOR DARBY, *Gent.*

Toby wondered if "Random Papers" was an accurate label, after all The fruits of a great man's life—or his credo, or his life wish itself—were prisoned in the next sentences, clear as a scarab in amber. How could he doubt that this was the sum of all that had gone before?

> America (and I use the word proudly, knowing that its meaning will deepen and grow richer with the years) has been good to all the Darbys, especially to my generation To say that I will now share my abundance with fellow Americans is, of course, an impertinence without real meaning Let me say rather that I propose to plow back that abundance into the Georgia earth—that it may flower at other doorsills than my own
>
> I am well aware that my contemporaries will call me a fool, or worse But if the world is to move in earnest—if this experiment we call America is to flourish and show the way—each

individual must pioneer as best he can And pioneering means far more than leveling the wilderness As we tame our western acres, we must explore our own hearts as well As we conquer this continent (and I am convinced that it is our destiny to conquer it, in time) we must also conquer the savage in our own hearts . . .

Toby poured a final glass of wine, and held back deliberately from the last paragraphs Knowing what was coming even before he read, sighing in advance over the flaw in Victor Darby's Utopia, he was still reluctant to face the bittersweet certainty:

> Utopia is only man's cloud-castle, the dream that sustains him in his imperfection—or so say the philosophers in our midst, the men of small minds to insist that human nature is unchangeable and unchanging But it is my conviction that the climate of Utopia is around us, here in America—if we Americans have the wit, and the wisdom, to grow up with our country, with soul as well as body
>
> To that end I have planned the Darby Company—and pray for its complete success To that end I have married my son to an upcountry Georgian—and pray that tidewater and piedmont blood may meet at last, and mingle To that end (now that my daughter is widowed after a so-called aristocratic marriage) it is my wish that she marry the president of my company, a man of promise who began his days as an indentured servant
>
> Affairs such as these, of course, are beyond my control, and beyond my time But America owes its beginning to such as they If they mate successfully, the blend will be better than its parts And what is America, after all, but a blend of the world's best—for the world's salvation?

Long after Toby had closed the diary Old Victor was still in the room Long after he had replaced it on the shelf with its fellows, his benefactor lingered, with the plea still flung, like a challenge, between them . . . The Founder's death, reflected Toby, was providential, after all The Founder could hardly have survived the discovery that his son had married a wanton, that his daughter was in league with pirates—and sworn to demolish his dream to her own profit

The pattern was clear at least—and as heart-breaking as Nancy's own plans Victor Darby, relying on his daughter to follow his wishes, had hoped that the last barrier to the company's success would be removed—by the simple device of wedding her to the company's president Victor—and Toby felt his heart plummet at the thought—had visioned a successful trade empire, conducted on strictly democratic lines, and capable of enriching all Georgia He had seen Sangaree as its logical headquarters as well as its crowning jewel How could

a man like Victor Darby understand that Sangaree would have another ruler and another destiny?

He closed his eyes and let wine-drugged senses reel toward the sleep he hungered for. Try as he might, he could see no other solution to the impasse Nancy and the Darby Company were divorced, so long as the company existed. While he remained its president, he would never permit a red-handed enemy to cross its threshold As for Martha—— Well, even Roy must take some notice of her infidelities in time, and blast that marriage, too, as though it had never been

So much for the human equation the Founder had constructed with such high hopes Beside its crumbling the financial triumph of the company seemed a poor reward. What did it matter if the Darby depot was bursting with wealth? What did it matter, to his future, if he had saved Nancy's life tonight—only to lose her to Pagnol?

He slept with that question tugging like a leech at his mind, sapping what remained of his strength Instantly another, darker mind took command in the heart of Dr Tobias Kent—conjuring a white-limbed, flame-crowned woman whose eyes were luminous with old sins, whose lips whispered secrets he had never known She was in his arms now, and the ecstasy of her possession, like the promise of those burning lips, was never-ending

ix

"You were sleeping so soundly, I hadn't the heart to waken you."

Roy was smiling down at him with a halo of lemon-colored sunlight at his back Dimly conscious of the comfort of the horsehair sofa, of the eiderdown that covered him to the chin, Toby yawned mightily It had been months since he had felt this rested—or this tranquil He stretched again under the eiderdown and held memory at arm's length for a moment more

"Did you sleep at all, Roy?"

"Bonnie spelled me at midnight I thought it was quite safe—and I was right"

Toby came back completely, heaving his relaxed body from the couch even as he shook the sleep from his brain He knew now that he had renounced Nancy, in the deeper sense, before he slept—that the decision had brought him tranquillity of a sort There was still a patient upstairs who needed his attention before he quitted her domain for the last time.

A patient upstairs . Yes, he could keep the relation impersonal now, with almost no effort.

"She's better, then?"

"The crisis passed in the night She's out of coma, and sleeping normally under a light opiate. Bonnie gave her a little broth at daybreak"

"Would you say she's out of danger?"

"I'd stake my soul on it, Toby—thanks to you."

"Never mind that now Shall we look at her together?"

If Roy was hurt by his abruptness, he gave no sign They walked into the high, sunshot hall together, without more than a glance for the knots of adoring slaves in every doorway. Even at that withdrawn moment Toby could sense another air at Sangaree—as though an invisible weight had been lifted from every heart.

"*They* know she's out of danger," said Roy. "They knew even before I said a word—don't ask me how."

Rex, waiting at Nancy's bedroom door, offered the final proof as he bent to kiss Toby's hand Sensing the tears in the major-domo's eyes, Toby accepted the homage with what grace he could muster

"Will you order my horse saddled, Rex? I must ride back to Savannah at once"

"Not before you've breakfasted," said Roy.

"I'll breakfast at the depot. You know how the work piles up."

"Damn the work for once. If anyones earned a holiday——"

"Sorry, Roy, but I'm not in a holiday mood" He went into the bedroom quickly, before his friend could speak again.

Nancy slept deeply in her nest of pillows With the turban bandage laid aside for the moment, and her hair twisted into a high copper braid, she was a model chatelaine, sleeping a sunny morning away Even a layman would have noted the improvement instantly, the impression of genuine repose. Toby sat by the bed for a long moment, testing the cool skin tone at cheek and forehead, the steady pulse The operative area, exposed for his inspection, had drained beautifully in the last twelve hours Though the discharge continued, there was no hint of inflammation to spoil the picture of a patient who has turned the corner.

"Your patient, Dr Darby"

Roy took Toby's place at the bedside. The fresh dressing built rapidly under his skillful hands Nancy stirred just once, when he was finishing the last winding of the turban, and Toby found he had turned aside instinctively, to stare out of a window with his back to the room Nancy's living presence, he found, had shattered his dearly bought peace in a twinkling.

Nancy wide awake—and fumbling with words of thanks—might be more than he could bear

"You'll stay with her, of course, until her convalescence is assured."

"Of course," said Roy, and rose from the bedside Watching his friend in the cheval glass, Toby could see that Roy was frowning at his withdrawal.

"I'd stay on if you needed me for anything"

"You needn't apologize, Toby."

"Then I'll go now, if I may."

"Since you insist——" Roy seemed about to say more, and turned back to his sister's bedside instead. Toby touched his arm lightly in passing

"You might walk me to the portico"

They came down the stairway again, side by side Heels clicked in the foyer as a brace of slaves rushed to fling the great entrance door wide Stable hands snapped to attention in the shadow of the portico, and made a concerted rush for the honor of helping Dr Kent to his saddle

Ready to ride away, feeling his aplomb return with each breath, Toby found that he could linger with safety, after all He even dared accept an oversized coffee cup from Rex's salver—and the traditional brandy glass that had helped a generation of gentlemen to their saddles at the Sangaree block.

"You'll come back tomorrow, or the day after?"

He smiled down at Roy, and shook his head. "Not unless I'm really needed She's your patient now."

"But, Toby——"

"I've my reasons, Roy. You must know most of them by heart"

"You said you'd quarreled You haven't told me why."

"It hardly matters now"

"If I could tell her that you'll meet her halfway, at least——"

"We have no meeting ground We'll never find one. That's a fact your father never grasped."

"You read the diary, then?"

"With deep interest I needn't say that his—his inspiration honors me greatly."

"But you won't follow orders?"

"It's the one order I can't obey, Roy"

"I'll tell you more, if it'll help," said Roy "Father always hoped you'd marry Nancy He hoped you'd move the Darby depot to these docks—make Sangaree your headquarters"

"I'm aware of that too D'you think she'd permit it for a moment, unless she were in complete control?"

"Sangaree will never support itself."

"That's Nancy's concern, not mine. My guess is she'll solve it neatly enough when she's recovered."
"If you mean Pagnol?"
"Why shouldn't she marry Pagnol, if he'll save her land?"
"Why won't *you* marry her, Toby?"
"I've told you why."
"I won't accept your reasons."
"You can plan other people's lives to a point, Roy. You can't plan them all the way. That's another fact your father couldn't understand. Utopias must be founded on people, after all. On people who love each other." He drew a deep breath before he went on. "I'm convinced that Nancy is incapable of love. There you have it."
"Don't you love her a little?"
"You know better than to ask that."
But Roy still clung to Lara's bridle. "Don't leave me in anger, Toby."
"I assure you I was never more calm."
"Then why are you shouting?"
"I'm not shouting, damn it! I'm only telling you that there's no substitute for love."
"I thought you loved her from your first day in Savannah. I thought that was why you fought so violently. Stop me, if I'm wrong."
Toby fitted boot to stirrup. "Convey my best wishes to your sister, Roy. Say that I hope for a speedy recovery. If she wishes to thank me, tell her it'll be thanks enough if she'll permit the Darby Company to function in peace hereafter."
"I don't understand a word of that, Toby."
"Nancy Gregory will understand."
"Come back in a fortnight, and explain yourself in person"
"I've set foot in Sangaree for the last time."
As he spoke, he touched spur to Lara and took the driveway at a brisk canter. Moss lashed his face as he rose in his stirrups to urge his monut to a hand gallop He was still galloping as he thundered over the narrow bridge and took the long curve of the river road that swept north to the main reach of the Savannah . . . I'll die before I look back, he promised himself. He kept that promise grimly, long after the first stand of cabbage palms had blocked the manor house from sight.
Come what may, he thought, I've begun my last accounting with the Darby Company—and with Nancy Darby Gregory. There'll be no need to alter the balance from this point on.

SIX • THE LAST ACCOUNTING

AS MEETINGS went, reflected Toby, this gathering of the Savannah Town Council, augmented, as usual, by a complete attendance of the Savannah Medical Association as well, had the virtue of liveliness at the moment, all the members seemed to be shouting at once He, too, had done his share of bellowing, for the present, he was content to sit in his place at the green-baize table, with his notes spread fanwise before him, and accept the glare of his enemies

Colonel McIntosh, the council's new president, pounded for order, the contending voices ignored the babble Above the mantel, the scarlet-coated figure of Oglethorpe seemed to frown down on the hubbub; the decorous white-and-gold meeting-room, actually, the upstairs banquet hall at Tondee's Tavern, had already seemed on the point of bursting with the din In that swirl of argument the figure of Dr Matthew Bristol was even more menacing than usual Slumped like a lazy tiger in his armchair and apparently half-asleep, his thoughts seemed far away from the present argument But Toby's memories of other council meetings told him that his ponderous foe could roar into action in a twinkling.

"Gentlemen! Address the chair singly, if you please!"

"D'you question our right to close the port, sir—if it's in the public interest?"

"Are you implying that I'm a money grabber first and a Georgian second?"

"Don't answer my question with another!"

McIntosh's brass-bound gavel took over at last, as McIntosh's own lusty baritone roared for order The peppery Scotsman, his wattles flaming with choler and his untidy wig askew, laced both fists on the table and glared round the suddenly silent circle.

"And now that our passions are spent, my friends, may we hear the voice of reason awhile? Or should I say the voice of our health officer, Dr Tobias Kent?"

"Why assume they're identical, McIntosh?"

It was Crowther who had spoken—and the cavalryman who had ridden with Marion was truculent as ever, despite the

faded wreck of his army dress coat. But McIntosh silenced him effectively enough

"Another sneer on that order, Colonel, and I'll do without the privilege of knowing you."

"Servant, Colonel. But I refuse to be stampeded by hysteria."

"And *I've* heard enough blasts today from ancient cannon. Dr. Kent has the floor, and I'll expel the first man who interrupts, I don't care who his grandfather was."

Toby was already on his feet, counting hostile eyes As usual, they seemed in the majority, though it was impossible to be sure. There had been ardent defenders in the general discussion, and many of those too-attentive glances were veiled At the moment Bristol's men sat rock-quiet about their leader, awaiting their cue

"All of us expected this meeting to be a heated one The existence of plague in Savannah is a deadly threat to us all"

Dr Tyree spoke mildly from the table's end. "How many cases of plague have you certified, Dr Kent?"

"Five, so far. All of them originating on our water front, and all terminating fatally"

"And you consider that a threat?"

"What would *you* call it, Doctor?"

"I've lived thirty years on Bull Street, Doctor. In most of those years I've lanced a few buboes on shipboard and ashore—and sent my patients to Lazaretto Island. Why can't you do likewise, without frightening our honest merchants into an ague of their own?"

Toby glanced at McIntosh, but that worthy, whose own munificence depended on the fruit and slave markets on The Bay, was listening with the same attention as the others This time there was no contending babble. Tyree's quiet statement had summed up the case for the room

"Have you ever fought an epidemic of plague, Dr. Tyree?"

"No, praise Heaven"

"I have, in the late war I assure you that the disease can spread like wildfire if common sense precautions are ignored"

"If that's an accusation, Kent"—Tyree's voice was still mild enough—"consider that question withdrawn. I'm sure you mean well Only——"

"Speak your mind, Dr Tyree," said Toby. "I'm accustomed to frankness in this room"

"I'll be frankness itself, Doctor As our health officer, you've every right to call a full council meeting I feel that you've abused that privilege today I say you've alarmed these good citizens needlessly with your hints of an epidemic."

"I'm doing more than hinting I'm telling you all that an

epidemic of the Black Death is in the making on Savannah water front, unless we all move promptly to check it at the source."

"You seriously feel that we should close the port?"

"I order that we close the Savannah for at least a fortnight, Dr. Tyree That, too, is my privilege" Toby slapped down the ominous murmur with a palm flat on the table, anticipating the president's gavel by a fraction. "May I state my case, Colonel McIntosh, or must I submit to further heckling?"

"State it by all means, Doctor."

"It's quite true that five fatalities from bubonic plague do not constitute an epidemic Unfortunately I'm convinced that there are other fatalities that haven't been certified" He glared straight at Matthew Bristol as he spoke, and waited for an outburst that did not come the elder Bristol still appeared to be in a deep doze, with only a slitted spark at each eyelid betraying his alertness.

"Whom are you accusing, Dr. Kent?" asked McIntosh.

"I accuse no one without proof But no less than four dead Negroes have been discovered floating among the pilings of the Darby depot this past fortnight—naked slaves, fresh from Africa, to judge by their bone ornaments In every case there was evidence that death had come from plague, despite their water logged conditions In every case the owner's brand mark had been burned away."

He paused to draw breath on that, confident that he had their attention now "Nine cases in two weeks are more than enough to convince me that our port should be closed, our warehouses burned out with sulphur, and our rat population decimated Above all, no slavers from Africa should be allowed to outfit at the Bristol docks, or elsewhere along the bluff"

Old Bristol's slitted eyes opened a trifle; he snorted just once, like any overweight animal whose rest has been disturbed Otherwise, his indifference to Toby's remarks could hardly have been more insolent.

"There was no human cargo aboard those slavers, Doctor," said McIntosh "Your own inspectors will vouch for that, I hope"

"True enough—when the ship warped into Savannah But there was another population aboard, no less sinister——"

Tyree cut in sharply "If you're referring to those dead rats you insisted I examine this morning——"

"The hold was alive with them As you gentlemen all know, rats are always abundant on slave ships—a fair percentage of their loss at sea is always due to death from rat bites I'm

afraid a good number of those rats deserted to our water front The two we killed as samples were both sick rodents. You'll recall the bloated condition of those specimens, Dr. Tyree "

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm repeating my conviction that rats spread bubonic plague I'm insisting that those rats were already infected, and others of their kind are running wild through our lower town."

"Can you prove any of this?"

"Can you explain why ships that are rat-proofed may trade at will along the African Gold Coast without a case of plague aboard?"

"That is negative evidence, I'm afraid. Naturally all of us would like to be free of the pests. I refuse to consider them a deadly danger "

"Will you concede that life would be better in Muskrat Town if we exterminated the rodent population?"

"Willingly."

"If the Darby Company will supply the sulphur and the labor, will you endorse my order to start war against them today?"

"Gladly, Dr. Kent."

"Of course we must attack in the warehouses as well—including the Bristol Docks "

This time old Bristol's eyes popped open as abruptly as though a spring had been turned at the socket. "If you're addressing me, Kent——"

"I've been addressing you for some time, sir. May I have your permission to clean your docks and warehouse at my own company's expense?"

"Damn your impertinence, sir My docks are clean now. Only a few months ago I weatherboarded 'em, at your insistence "

"They're not clean of rats, Dr Bristol. My men can vouch for that "

"Damn your noses too. A man's property is his own business—so long as it doesn't offend his neighbor "

"My point exactly. Do you deny cleaning slavers at your stringpiece?"

"Why should I deny it? I'd auction blacks on that same stringpiece if the council would permit it "

It was Toby's turn to still a rising murmur in the room. Savannah, though it had practiced the profitable gamut of slavery for a generation now, still recalled Oglethorpe's prohibition on the actual traffic within its borders That law—like Oglethorpe's own dream of Utopia—had been a dead letter

before the Revolution A slave market flourished openly on The Bay, with Colonel McIntosh as an all-too-happy proprietor. For all that, slavers knew better than to sail up to the bluff with their cargoes These, as every Savannah resident knew, were dumped at the river's mouth, or in one of the many coastal bays down the coast, to join the caravans plodding up from Spanish Florida

Not even Matthew Bristol would dare to flout this convention. Clinging to that hard fact—and praying that his enemy's insolence had already swung votes to the Darby Company's side—Toby played his ace as calmly as he could.

"A moment ago, Dr Bristol, I mentioned four dead Negroes fouled in the slack water under our piers. D'you deny that they were your property?"

Watching the old man's eyes, hooded, now, like a basilisk's, and just as deadly, Toby had his answer in advance. While he waited for Bristol's face to freeze into its familiar mask of contempt, he took in details mechanically, as any doctor would the tic at the base of Bristol's eye socket—a nerve that jumped like clockwork; the vast archipelago of liver spots that spread from cheek to jowl, to lose themselves in the immaculate lace of the nabob's stock, the yellowed teeth, bared in a travesty of a grin, as Bristol turned at last to McIntosh . . . I've struck at his heart at last, thought Toby exultantly Not even Machiavelli could rise above the chapter and verse I've prepared for today.

"Must I answer this inane question, Donald?"

"I'm afraid you must, Matthew."

"Is this fellow accusing me of smuggling slaves?"

Toby spoke, just ahead of McIntosh "Everyone in this room knows you can afford to buy your slaves in the open market, Doctor I'm merely reminding you of four recent purchases—made, in your name, at the market in St Augustine last month The Negroes were picked up for you by the skipper of the barkentine *Algeria*, enroute to Savannah for refitting, after a profitable run from Africa The Negroes were delivered by that same barkentine a fortnight ago Unfortunately the weather was unseasonable for spring—the heat and the stench of an uncleaned slaver were too much for your precious cargo"

"What are you driving at, sir? I demand that you come to the point——"

"The point is already made, Doctor I accuse you of secreting four slaves in your warehouse, struggling in vain to cure them of a hopeless case of plague"

Voices were roaring now all over the room, but Bristol's

deep animal bellow topped the others instantly. "That's a lie, and you know it!"

Toby's fingers curled about the riding gloves that lay beside his notes For a few taut seconds the impulse to lash Bristol's sneering mouth was all but uncontrollable.

"Your age and your proven guilt are your only excuse, Doctor," he said at last, as the voices died Every eye in the council chamber was fastened on Bristol now. Watching the instinctive tightening of the Bristol men, as their leader drew himself to full height and matched the hostile glares, Toby was certain that his point had registered. He drove it home firmly, for good measure.

"Do you deny that there were four newly bought slaves of yours aboard the *Algeria* a fortnight ago?"

"Why should I trouble to deny it?"

Answer my question, you diehard fool, Toby raged inwardly Can't you realize that I've proof positive that you dumped that black flesh from your stringpiece as casually as you'd dispose of four dead mules?

Aloud he said only, "My inspector's report is on the table. I'll be happy to read it into our minutes, if you prefer."

"Very well. I did receive four Negroes at my warehouse. I did hospitalize them for a while, when I saw they were suffering from peripneumonia And I did toss their carcasses into the river when they died The river was at flood How should I know they'd wash under your depot?"

Again the murmur rose around them, and this time Toby permitted McIntosh's gavel to bang it into silence.

"Did you certify their deaths?"

"Naturally not One doesn't certify a slave's death, until that slave is registered. I felt I was acting wisely to detain them—until I was sure of their health There's nothing illegal about buying blacks under the Spanish crown for use in Georgia——" Bristol swallowed the rest, and crimsoned with fury as the roar of voices threatened to engulf his own roar.

"Did you consider the health of your neighbors when you disposed of your—your property?"

"Dead bodies are no novelty in the Savannah in the spring floods"

"Not even bodies that are rotten with plague?"

"Prove that those blackamoors had plague!"

"The four autopsies are entered in my clinic diary" Toby handed the fat notebook across the table to Tyree, ignoring Bristol's itching fingers at the edge of the green baize

"Can you produce the bodies now?"

"Of course not They were cremated at once—in the interest of public health."

"Along with the alleged plague cases from your own lazaretto?"

"Precisely My lazaretto, as you put it, happens to be a cargo ship I've converted into a floating hospital—and ratproofed *My* sick Negroes had what care I could give them. When they died, their deaths were certified at the vendue house, and their bodies burned That same floating hospital is ready to take thirty cases, when and if the epidemic strikes us"

Toby had spoken slowly, for the flying quill of the council's clerk Watching the last shorthand pothooks go down on the foolscap, he slapped the table for silence one more time.

"All this is mere wordplay around a few hard facts. I've the proof that Bristol's docks harbored plague victims and that they now harbor rats that are, at the very least, an affront to public comfort I've proof of the doctor's negligence, which the council may disregard in view of his past. I'm asking for blanket authority to police Muskrat Town at my expense and break this threat before it takes shape May I ask the president for a vote?"

The chorus of yeas drowned McIntosh's gavel Even though he had played his cards shamelessly, for just such a result, Toby's jaw sagged a bit at the reception. Colonel Crowther was on his feet now, shouting with the majority. So was Tyree, and the white-wigged doctors' group that still bowed to him under duress . But Matthew Bristol sat through the voice vote with his assurance unshaken

"I still say that a man's property is his own, to manage as he likes And that includes a man's slaves"

Tyree said mildly enough, "Didn't you know it was plague, Matthew?"

"The cases are down in my books as peripneumonia. You've only this fellow's word to the contrary. Damn it all, Tyree, *you've* tossed more than one black to the buzzards when you couldn't spare hands for burying"

"Not if they were infected with the black death, Matthew. That's going too far, and you know it."

"So you're taking Kent's word over mine?"

A great stillness claimed the room as the deans among Savannah's medicos faced each other across the council table But old Tyree's eyes did not falter; his voice was crisp, and only a little weary, when he spoke again.

"I'm taking Dr Kent's word, Matthew"

"Then I've no choice. I'll defend my property as best I'm able."

"You must admit Dr. Kent's inspectors when they call on you That's the law."

"Not if they come with sulphur pots I've fifty tobacco hogsheads under my main roof D'you think I'll risk spoiling the leaf?"

"Others are taking the same risk, Matthew; the Darby Company most of all "

"Damn the Darby Company, sir. Double damn its upstart president. A man's property is his own—to manage as he likes A man's blacks are his own—to dispose of as he sees fit. What becomes of Georgia if those fundamental rights are denied?" Bristol had roared the words from bursting lungs, with one eye on the council clerk's shorthand Now he spoke almost quietly, emphasizing each pause with a fist on the table top. "I'll defend those rights to the death—and beyond. And I advise the council not to tempt me too far."

McIntosh took back his authority as he nailed Bristol's last word with his gavel "Say what you mean, Matthew."

"You know what I mean, Donald I've twenty armed tenants at my plantation now, awaiting orders. They can come down river in three hours, if need be "

"So you're declaring war on your friends?"

"I'm protecting what's mine Give me your assurance that this busybody will be restrained, and I'll leave this meeting quietly Give him his head, and I'll blow it off if he appears on our docks "

"You heard the vote, Matthew. May I wish you good morning?"

Bristol turned on his heel without returning McIntosh's bow and stalked from the chamber. His henchmen, minor landowners, for the most part, and a few factors turned merchant, followed at his heel, with a fair assumption of their master's dignity No one stirred until the door closed. Then, in a kind of quick scramble, a score of council members moved forward to take the vacated chairs about the table Other small landowners, most of whom Toby now knew by name, other small merchants, who had fought their way into council seats, and had hardly dared to speak their minds before today

McIntosh glanced calmly around the re-formed circle. "Now that Mr Bristol has renounced us, I gather we're unanimous on Dr Kent's scheme? What d'you say to his demand that we close the port?"

Toby had known the vote would be closer here, but it was good to hear the spirited argument as new members found their tongues. Like any cyclone, Bristol's departure

had cleared the air magically. When the vote was taken, the majority in favor of the precaution was small, but definite

"The procedure is in your hands, Dr. Kent," said McIntosh "It's one thing to say we'll keep out shipping—quite another to perform"

"Look through your windows, gentlemen," said Toby. "You'll see that there's little shipping in the Savannah now —save the bottoms you yourselves own My guess is there'll be less by sundown, when the news of this meeting reaches the harbor."

What he said was true enough The story of the plague cases in Muskrat Town and the mysterious presence of a lazaretto somewhere in the vicinity of the harbor had frightened more than one master into slipping his cable, without waiting to complete his loadings. The news that the port would be closed, in Toby's opinion, would be more than enough to sweep the roadstead clean

"In our last bout with yellow jack," said Tyree, "we set up a quarantine station at Lazaretto Island and forced each vessel to turn back, unless it would submit to our inspections We can do as much now, and establish a second station at Darbyville"

"What about Matthew Bristol? He has a ship due in from Barbadoes His skippers all know the channel—they can warp into his dockside without asking for a pilot"

"Will you leave my old friend Matthew to me, Dr. Kent? I'm afraid he was a bit badgered just now"

"You think you can persuade him to yield?"

"I can try at least. If I fail, we'll occupy his warehouses by force There's no other way Yes, and we'll turn back his ships, if they dare to enter the roadstead"

Toby bowed his thanks to the president of the council "Are we of one mind, then, gentlemen?"

The cheer that greeted his question would have warmed any heart—even the heart of Toby Kent, who had no real cause to rejoice today as he clumped down the stairs of Tondee's and emerged into the hot April sunlight of Bull Street with yet another battle in the making

ii

When he turned into The Bay and let his eyes roam among the channel buoys, he could hardly believe what he saw. Rhetoric in the council chamber was one thing, reality was a more bracing lesson

Atop the ramp that led down to the warehouses of the Darby depot he could command the whole sweep of the

Savannah roadstead Only this morning, when he had forced his reluctant feet up the stairs of Tondee's Tavern, that same anchorage had boasted a score of ships, each anchored trimly at her own bell buoy Now, with the sun only a few points beyond its zenith, that same roadstead seemed empty as the moon Even as he watched, the last of their visitors—a trim brig with the Red Duster of England at her peak—turned gracefully into the tide and coasted away for the south-bound buoy with all sails spread and a skipper conning the bluff with a telescope, as though he expected to be shelled at any moment.

So much for rumor, he thought. Especially if the rumor is buttressed with a little solid fact. They had shouted for a long time at the council chamber on the advisability of closing the port—and the reasons for that drastic step Every outbound merchantman in the harbor, with an alert nose ashore, had smelled quarantine in the air long before the first topsail was unfurled The magnanimity of the council in closing the port of Savannah for a time had been an inexpensive gesture after all Until the threat of plague had subsided, until another, more genial rumor had reached out to Nassau and Havana and the fledgling ports of the North and soothed away the panic, that tidal reach would be a paradise for fishing pelican

In a sense, it was a tribute to Dr. Tobias Kent—and his special alchemy—that a few shouted words in council could produce this reaction. Dr Kent experienced no sense of triumph as he walked out into the full glare of sunlight on The Bay and paused before the vendue house

As usual, the porch of the vendue house was crowded with upcountry drovers and commission men from the merchants' offices along The Bay, the press was thickest today about the vendue board itself Toby did not pause to wonder, when the shoulders parted to give him free access to the board In fact, thanks to the tumult of his mind, he found that he had read the notice twice before he grasped its meaning:

> I hereby Proclaim the person known as Felix Pagnol (though whether that is his True Name, I'm not prepar'd to state) to be a Scoundrel, an Ingrate, a Liar, and a Vile Plotter against the Future of Our Commonwealth Gentlemen in Funds, beware of his presence at the Gaming Table Fathers of Families, if you value the virgin purity of your Daughters, Bar your Doors against Him Husbands, Guard your wives when he is about—or, better, ship them Forthwith to Foreign Parts
>
> Gabriel Thatch, Esq
>
> April 2nd, 1786.

It was Toby's first intimation that Pagnol had at last returned to Savannah—and his first hint of Gabriel's purpose He stared at the notice, bemused, and found that he was smiling despite the gray fog that settled so inexorably these days when he was alone, with no crusade to preach and no problem to conquer. Gabriel, after all, was unpredictable as a wasp—and quite as deadly, when he chose to fling a challenge If he had chosen Pagnol for reasons of his own . . . Toby shrugged broadly and turned away from the board, ignoring the stares that followed him to the steps of the Darby depot. It was only when he paused in the shadow of the stairwell that led to the office block that he grasped the full import of Gabriel Thatch's audacity.

Obviously that public challenge was quite in character where Gabriel was concerned—and quite as certain to get results Pagnol would now have no choice but to fight, or leave Savannah at once And Toby was convinced that the Frenchman, regardless of his enigmatic position here in Georgia, and his patent interest in Nancy Gregory, was no coward

More than one life, so far as Savannah was concerned, had been ruined because of such a challenge by an unscrupulous person who was also a dead shot at twenty paces Ruined in the primitive social world of this infant republic—or ruined, more permanently, under the mossed oaks of the Trustees Garden Gabriel, who could split an English penny at twenty paces merely by fanning the coin into his pistol sights, was well aware of the chances he was taking Knowing in whose behalf he had undertaken to blast Felix Pagnol from this earth, Toby took the stairs to his office in a bound He was hardly surprised when Gabriel himself rose from the desk with his best formal bow

"You needn't stare so wildly, Toby," said the journalist. "I'm sure the idea has had time to register."

"Why did you do it, you fool?"

"Is that an honest question, or are you sparring for time? I must say you read the challenge calmly enough Don't think you weren't observed from this office casement "

"Are you aware you'll probably be dead this time tomorrow?"

"Most wise men are aware of that much, if they dwell on the brink of a wilderness "

"But why, Gabe, why? The fellow has given his proofs twenty times——"

"I'm risking my hide for you, Toby. Or must I say for you and the fair Nancy?"

"Never mind Nancy now."

"On the contrary, I think of Nancy constantly—if only to keep my brain attuned to yours."

"You must know we've parted company once and for all. I haven't laid eyes on her since I operated at Sangaree four good months ago."

"A fact of no importance, if she's constantly in your thoughts. You know he's returned to Georgia for one reason."

"Pagnol's reasons for existing are of no interest to me."

"You lie in your teeth, my friend. He's come back to Savannah to marry her. The whole town's heard as much, and so have you."

"And why shouldn't he marry Nancy Gregory, if she's agreeable?"

"Because you want her for yourself, my friend, once she's properly humbled."

Toby stared hard at Gabriel, but the journalist's eyes were steady. "Deny it, if you like. It's essential to my profession to see through people's illusions—and dredge up their true motives."

"A full year ago I told you I'd sooner bed a wildcat."

"The remark is beginning to get monotonous. In fact, I'm beginning to think you're fond of wildcats. Most men are, if the truth were told."

"Unfortunately you don't know the whole story. I'd tell you if I could."

"The essentials are all that matter. Two years ago you swept into Savannah and blew Nancy Gregory's smug little existence sky-high. You proved that her father's property, under your management, could be ten times more profitable than she dreamed. You smashed her hope of keeping Sangaree, on her terms. Naturally she fought you with every weapon at her command. What do the weapons matter, now you've bested her?"

"Don't be too sure of that. I've still to make my last accounting. Sam and I must prove, to Judge Armstrong's satisfaction, that the Darby Company is really profitable."

"After which you're to take permanent control, under Victor Darby's will. You know as well as I that Armstrong's endorsement is only a formality."

"It's quite true that we've made a tidy fortune our second year. It's also true that little of the cash remains on our books. Something over twelve thousand pounds are in our tenants' pockets at Darbyville."

"Surely that counts as profit—if you're a sharing corporation."

"Armstrong may rule otherwise. In fact, when we've paid

our clerks' salaries this week, I'm afraid we must begin borrowing on our warehouse manifests."

"You're a fool, Toby. Why couldn't you wait till after the accounting to distribute those profits?"

"Tenants must eat as well as owners, Gabe."

The journalist took a nervous, long-legged turn of the office, and paused at Toby's desk to con the pages of a ledger. "If I read Leary's figures right, those warehouse manifests are a fortune in themselves."

"True enough. I've a dozen British factors begging for our tobacco now—and as many more ready to pay cash on the barrel for our rice. But I must guarantee shipment to the Pool before they'll pay a cent." Toby's eyes strayed to the wide-open window and the sweep of harbor below. "How many ships can you count at our buoys this morning?"

Gabriel sighed deeply. "Answer one question frankly. Are you *trying* to fail, for reasons of your own?"

Toby offered the journalist his most disarming smile. "Why should the idea cross your mind?"

"First, you wipe all current profits from your books at the worst possible moment. Second, you stir up a threat of plague when your warehouses are full to bursting."

"There have been nine plague deaths in this port within two weeks—not counting what old Bristol has covered in his slave barricade upriver. As health officer of this town, I could do no less than close the port."

Again Gabriel sighed, from his cynic's heart. "Yes, I know all about your plea at the council this morning—eloquence travels fast in Savannah. I know you've maneuvered Bristol into a spot where he must fight in the open, or crawl. Applauding you as I must, I still maintain that there's more here than meets the eye."

Silence fell between the friends—an oddly hostile silence which Toby made no effort to break. When Gabriel spoke again, his voice was testy as a schoolmaster confronted by a stubborn pupil.

"Is it possible that you'd like to see the company fail? Are you planning to surrender to Nancy after all, and leave Savannah? If you are, I see no real point in killing Pagnol."

"That's your first sensible remark today."

"Shall I merely wing him tomorrow, and let him marry Nancy? I'm sure he'll make a graceful seigneur of Sangaree."

"Can't you spare me anything, Gabe?"

"So we're shouting at each other. That's more like it. Will you confess that you must master the wench, or own yourself a failure?"

"I'll confess this much: nothing would please me more

than closing this office door tomorrow and bidding Savannah good-by"

"A mealy-mouthed sentiment unworthy of a pioneer," said Gabriel "Especially a pioneer named Tobias Kent. How can you be happy, if you turn your back on what you really want?"

"May I judge my own happiness?"

"Damn you, sir, you may not Tomorrow I shall remove Captain Pagnol, who seems to be the chief threat to your happiness The day after I'll force the fair Nancy to confess that you're her master, and that she's loved you madly from the beginning."

"I'm afraid that's a tall order."

"Time will tell In the interval you'll serve as my second, when I take the Frenchman to King's Island. McIntosh has already promised he'll preside"

"Did you say King's Island?"

"Pagnol agreed with me that it was a perfect spot. Sorry, Toby, I should have mentioned that we're dueling New Orleans style." The journalist opened his wallet and tossed a sheet of note paper on the desk "Here's a copy of the cartel: I'm running it in next week's *Mercury*, to give my readers a taste of genuine drama If I'm dead, they'll shudder at my daring If I'm alive, I'll write an editorial damning the swamp duel as a leftover from barbarism"

"How many swamp duels have you fought, Gabe?"

"This is my first Thanks to my background, I hope to enjoy it thoroughly."

But Toby was frowning through the cartel now. The articles of the duel were simple and expressed in rigid conformity with the code Gabriel and Pagnol agreed to meet on King's Island, a kind of marshy sand bar in mid-river, no more than two miles from the Savannah bluff. A long, irregular rectangle perhaps six hundred yards in length, King's Island was covered with a dense tangle of scrub oak and palmetto along its spine and hip-deep in saw grass along its muddy margins The principals in the duel, the cartel stated, would stand ready to enter the marshy jungle from opposite ends of the island Awaiting a given signal, and armed only with a dueling pistol and a six-inch sheath knife, they would stalk each other in the underbrush until honor was satisfied

"Whose notion was this? Yours, or Pagnol's?"

"His, naturally. Since I offered the challenge, he had the choice of ground and weapons Apparently he fought a dozen such duels in New Orleans, and lived to boast of it. I plan to

break his winning streak tomorrow—between dusk and midnight."

"You can't fight in the dark!"

"Read on, Toby The cartel specifies moonlight"

Choosing the first moonlit night, the articles continued, the principals would embark secretly from the Darby docks. Gabriel and his second would go first, bringing with them the presiding officer. Pagnol and his second—a Colonel Ollonais whom Toby remembered as a fixture of Tondee's taproom—would follow shortly thereafter. Meeting on a spot of dry ground on the west beach of the island, the seconds would examine and distribute the weapons under the eyes of McIntosh, who would remain at this station thereafter. Each second would then escort his opposing principal to opposite ends of the island, the seconds would carry lanterns, for their guidance only. A pistol shot from McIntosh would signal the beginning of the duel Once the principals had vanished into the jungle, the seconds were strictly enjoined to remain motionless beside their lanterns—which were to be used again only after shots had been exchanged, or when one opponent had been so grievously wounded as to call for help

"Observe that McIntosh and Ollonais have already signed," said Gabriel. "There's an empty space for your squiggle, under my name"

"Suppose I take this cartel to the council and denounce the whole affair?"

"How can you, with McIntosh presiding on the ground?"

Toby cursed adequately, and added his signature to the paper. "I'll come for one reason only—you'll need a surgeon It's unfortunate that I can't take out your alleged brain and rearrange it"

"*Affaire entendue, mon vieux,* as Captain Pagnol himself would say" Gabriel got up breezily, as he folded the paper into his wallet "I'll leave you with one thought, now we're on the subject of duels Harvey Bristol is back in Savannah."

"Harvey Bristol's no concern of mine"

"He may be of Roy's"

"Say what you mean, Gabe"

"Where have you kept yourself, since Martha Darby went up to Charleston? Hadn't you heard she's been living there with Harvey, all but openly?"

Toby slapped the desk top "Don't say things you can't prove" He, too, had heard such gossip, from a dozen sources, and had closed his ears, for Roy's sake

"Have you seen her since she returned—or haven't you dared?"

"Why shouldn't I dare?"

"We both know she's a trollop, Toby. If you didn't tumble her while Roy was in London, you've only yourself to blame." Gabriel closed his eyes on a hectic memory and savored it with a sigh. "Of course tumbling Mrs. Darby at home, among friends, is one thing. Giving Harvey Bristol entree is another."

"Why not challenge *him*, when you've done for Pagnol?"

"I'm afraid that's Roy's prerogative—and I'm afraid he'll exercise it. Especially now that Harvey's dared to follow her to Savannah. Had you heard he'd sailed down on that slaver—when it was refused a dock at Charleston?"

"The only passenger, excepts the rats, and those four blacks under hatches."

"If you ask me, he was in excellent company. The fact remains that he seems to be here to stay—probably to lend his lard-pail father a little moral and financial support. Roy has no choice but to challenge him. There are some things we can't stomach, even in this corner of Georgia."

"He'll murder Roy in cold blood."

"Precisely. I've racked my brains for some way to postpone that meeting. Suppose you rack yours a little." Gabriel turned to the hall doorway and paused with a foot on the threshold. "Incidentally, where's the deceived husband today?"

"Making country calls above Darbyville."

"Thank Heaven for small blessings. That means he can't challenge Harvey until tomorrow. Or even the day after—if he's as immune to gossip as usual. You must still remember that he'll hear the truth eventually—and take steps while there's time."

"Have you any suggestions?"

"Just one, if you'll consider it. You might write to Sangaree. Ask the lovely Mrs. Gregory to intercede with Harvey. After all, he was her fiancé not too long ago."

"If you think that she'd lift a finger——!"

"Roy's her brother, after all. She won't let him die, if she can prevent it."

Toby sat for a long time at his desk after Gabriel had gone. Once again he had a sensation, not too unpleasant, of riding a wave that was bearing him inexorably—into the heart of a crisis beyond his control. Surely Gabriel's parting advice had been excellent. if Nancy could, indeed, save Roy Darby from Harvey's dueling pistol, it was his duty to summon her at once. . . An impersonal note, dispatched by Priam, who had proved such an excellent boatman since his discharge from the clinic, would turn the trick nicely. On second thought, he would need Priam for the business at King's Island tomorrow. Billy could travel even faster on horseback.

He had neither spoken nor written to Nancy Gregory

since the night he had saved her life—a formal note of thanks from Sangaree had been Nancy's only acknowledgment of his existence, these past four months. He had, of course, treasured every scrap of information he could gather: Roy's reports on her speedy recovery from the mastoid operation, the news that her own slaves brought upriver, even the accounts of Savannah patients who had dined with her at Sangaree. Apparently she was spending all her time at the manor house these days, perfecting the velvet sheen of her gardens, adding new gloss, and new London furniture, to her formal rooms. Gossip had it that this was mere window dressing to the actual reopening of Sangaree, after she had announced her marriage to Pagnol . . .

Pagnol might die tomorrow, thanks to Gabriel's quixotic whim How would Nancy fare, if her last protector vanished? Who would assure her future welfare, if Roy, too, was chopped down by the remorseless ax of the code duello?

He took a quill from the rack and wrote rapidly, without pausing to shape his thoughts. Since he must exclude all feeling, first words would do:

MRS GREGORY:

A Situation has arisen which demands your immediate Presence in Savannah Please believe that I would never dispatch this summons, if the Need were not urgent

Will you, therefore, call first at our Clinic on your arrival, and ask for either Self or Roy?

Perhaps I should add that this concerns me in no way.

Yr Obd't Servant

TOBIAS KENT

Cold words, but compelling: he could hardly doubt that they would bring her to Savannah posthaste He sealed the folded sheet with the Darby wafer, stamped on the Darby seal, and hesitated, with one hand on the bell cord Roy would be in Darbyville until late tomorrow, and Roy was the immediate cause of the letter. If Billy rode down to Sangaree with the message now, he would arrive in the late afternoon. Nancy could ride back easily before dusk. . . He would hold the note until tomorrow True, she would not be in time to intercede for her lover, but Pagnol could take his chances with Gabriel

He locked the letter in his desk, swept the desk top clean of work in one flailing motion of his arm The battle that was joining beyond the Darby depot would need no ledgers from this point on As for Nancy herself—— Well, he would ponder the wisdom of sending that note tomorrow.

Stumping down the stairs, avoiding the questioning eyes of his clerks, he left the depot without a backward glance, and

pointed his nose for Tondee's corner Rum was waiting in the taproom, bringing its own familiar oblivion. Tomorrow was time enough to face his problems. In the months just gone he had drunk his way into too many blind midnights to doubt his recuperation He would be sober tomorrow—when he rowed out to King's Island with Gabriel.

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Priam's oar, sweeping in a wide arc on the mirror-dark river, spun the flatboat away from the Darby pier; Priam's soft-voiced warning caused his three passengers to duck their heads in time, as the bateau swam heavily through the maze of cables at dockside and gained the wide-open stream beyond. The four coastal snows and the two sloop-rigged yawls that plied on minor errands upriver seemed enormous tonight, against the clear night sky, now that the last merchantman had left the roadstead McIntosh, shivering in his boat cloak, shook his fist at the first empty buoy that ghosted past their gunwale "Speaking of rats, Kent, what about skippers that run out on their contracts?"

"Rumor's a friendly bird, sir. One never knows on whose yardarm he'll choose to roost"

"Granted, Doctor And yet, how *could* they know, this forenoon, that we'd voted to close the port?"

"All Savannah knew, Mr. McIntosh—thanks to the open windows of the council chamber Why shouldn't our visitors from overseas?" Toby managed a chuckle of sorts despite the heavy dampness of the April evening "Look upriver. a point to starboard You'll observe one vessel that didn't slip her cable"

They fell silent as the barkentine slipped into the channel from a hidden bay on the Carolina side—a tall, proud vessel, handling easily in the gentle west wind and taking the thrust of the tide as her due Priam, leaning hard on his sweep, worked upriver in the slack water along the southern bank, giving the barkentine a wide berth by instinct

"Don't tell me that's your hospital ship, Dr Kent?"

"The *Lady Oglethorpe* herself Empty, as of now, save for a skeleton crew. I had her limed this afternoon, she has orders to tie in at the Darby stringpiece until we find more patients—which God forbid."

"All Savannah was wondering where you'd berthed her" McIntosh let out his breath in a long whistle of admiration as they rose in unison from the thwarts to watch the barkentine glide smoothly down river "'Tis a noble ship to use as a sick bay, Doctor—asking your pardon."

"The sick deservé the best of asylums, Mr. McIntosh," said Toby dryly. "Have *you* ever burst a plague boil and waited for the fever to break?"

Gabriel, coiled in a snug nest above the forward thwart, cleared his throat, not at all delicately "Your pardon, gentlemen, but may I remind you that you're conveying me to King's Island and a probably fatal duel?"

"The ground was your choice, Mr. Thatch," said McIntosh bluntly

"And Captain Pagnol's. I've no regrets, so far. It's an ideal night for bloodletting"

Toby, lifting his eyes to the flawless cobalt dome of the sky, endorsed the statement silently. Thanks to the prodigal wash of moonlight on land and river, the whole Georgia landscape seemed bathed in quicksilver radiance, the shadows of the palms along the bank, the high, proud tracery of lightwood branches against the sky seemed inked in by the hand of some cosmic artist—a painter whose brush was both fluent and bold. The sky itself, spangled with stardust, seemed blue rather than black, as though the high, round moon had created a magic of its own, transforming the spring night into a kind of clean-cut day.

"An ideal night for sharpshooters, you mean," said McIntosh "If I were you, Mr Thatch, I'd pray for a cloud or two before you hear my signal"

"A pox on your long face, sir Look behind us, Priam. Has my opponent taken to the water?"

"Longboat follah, Mist' Gabe. Mebbe two hundred yard astern—mebbe mo'." Priam, steering by special instinct, had utilized every foot of slack water so far—clearing snags with inches to spare, dodging the shove of the outgoing tide with all the ease of a sea otter And yet, even as he granted the man his skill, Toby was vaguely uneasy. There was something prehistoric about Priam—and Priam's skill in matching wits with the Savannah Toby could almost wish that he had sent the slave down river with his message to Sangaree and brought Billy to King's Island instead At least he could rejoice in the canoe, bobbing on its painter at the bateau's square stern Once they were grounded on the King's Island beach, Priam could be sent back to the Darby dock On the return journey, either Toby or McIntosh—depending on the outcome of tonight's business—could handle the flatboat with ease, with the full thrust of the Savannah behind them.

But Gabriel was still conning the channel astern "Who's at the oars—Pagnol or Ollonais?"

"The cunnel, Mist' Toby The cap'n, he rest in bow, jes' like you restin' now"

"At this rate we'll fetch the island a good half-hour ahead of them. Coast into a backwater, Priam; let them catch up on us a bit—let 'em worry about why we're idling against the bank."

McIntosh spoke sternly as the slave prepared to follow Gabriel's command "We'll do nothing of the sort, Mr. Thatch. I can use that half-hour to good advantage, inspecting the field—if one can call King's Island a field of honor."

"Colonel Ollonais and I inspected it thoroughly this forenoon," said Toby. "Will you trust my judgment, if I say that it's a workable battlefield for two enemies—providing they're both trained mud hens?"

"I must say you're taking all this lightly, Doctor."

"No more lightly than our principal, I'm afraid"

Gabriel laughed aloud. "To Colonel McIntosh, our little affair tonight is a *danse macabre* To me, it's *opéra bouffe.* As my scoundrel of an opponent would say, *chacun à son goût*"

McIntosh, who knew no French, stirred uneasily on his thwart "If you must joke about death, Mr. Thatch, perhaps you'd best keep silent"

No one spoke again until the bulk of King's Island loomed above them Priam had sculled into the narrower channel, where the current turned to the high bank of the mainland. The bateau moved easily into the slack water on the island's lee Already the grotesque tangle of jungle and saw grass, rising like a wall against the moonlit sky, seemed to hang above their prow

"Can you make out the beach, Priam?"

"Dead ahead, Mist' Toby."

Their cypress bottom grated in sand as the slave spoke. Toby was overside instantly, glad of the chance for action. With McIntosh at the opposite gunwale and Priam straining mightily on the sweep, they brought the flatboat well up on the sandy beach, away from the slight pull of the tide. Gabriel, as befitted a duelist who must husband his strength, sat throned at the forward thwart and skipped ashore only when there was dry ground underfoot.

"Our opponents made good time after all," he said. "Here they come now"

Quartering out of the stiff current at the far bank, the longboat came into plain view as it eased into slack water. Somewhat to his surprise, Toby noted that Pagnol had taken an oar Between them, D'Estaing's two veterans were making the longboat hum

"He seems as eager for combat as I," said Gabriel. "Is that a good omen—or a bad one?"

No one answered that flippant question as the two French-

men stepped ashore—and even Gabriel seemed to realize that the time for flippancy was over. Pagnol was all in black tonight, with the revers of his coat buttoned to the chin; he looked every inch the duelist as he bowed from the waist, a separate bow for each American in turn By contrast, Colonel Ollonais, in his white dress uniform, seemed turned out for a non-existent parade ground The medals at his left breast winked wanly, even in the moonlight, his fat legs, encased in gleaming black hip boots, twinkled like an overweight dancing master's as he offered Toby a heel-clicking salute.

"Le Negre—pourquoi est-il ici?"

"English, if you please, Jules," said Pagnol. "I do not object to the presence of Dr. Kent's slave."

"There's no mention of a black boatman in the cartel"

"Priam is leaving the island at once," said Toby "He came this far only to show us the channel."

"You're returning him to Savannah, then?"

"With your permission, Colonel Ollonais?"

"With my permission," said the fat Frenchman stiffly "But do Negroes travel alone after dark in Georgia?"

"He has my written permit," said McIntosh, just as stiffly.

"In that case, gentlemen, consider my objection withdrawn"

No one stirred in the hostile semicircle as Priam waded hip-deep into the Savannah, untied the canoe at the flatboat's stern, and hoisted himself aboard Fixed as flint in the moonlight, the five white faces turned in unison to watch the black's progress Once it had gained the channel, the canoe seemed to take wings on that pulsing current, and vanished instantly among the shadows of the far bank

"May we proceed, Colonel?" said McIntosh.

"Servant, Colonel," said Ollonais

"I understand that you and Dr Kent have inspected the ground"

"We have found it adequate, sir"

"And the weapons?"

"You, I believe, have the pistol case We brought the knives"

Ollonais produced the two gleaming blades as he spoke and passed them from hand to hand Toby saw that they were both bone-handled tobacco knives, honed razor-sharp Pagnol, balancing his selection in his palm, turned on his toes and sent the knife singing through the air The group watched in silence as the blade, thrown bone end foremost, turned neatly in mid-air and all but buried itself in the spongy bole of a cabbage palm a good thirty feet away.

"A well-balanced weapon, gentlemen"

Gabriel chuckled, rose on his own toes, and paralleled the

Frenchman's throw. His own blade, sinking in the cabbage palm just above the first knife, sang a shrill defiance of its own as it quivered there

"Epatant," said Gabriel. "May I ask where you came by your skill, Captain?"

"As a youth in Canada," said the Frenchman "With the *coureurs de bois.* And you?"

"As a backwoods brat with my friend Dr. Kent."

They had spoken with perfect courtesy, but Toby felt his heart constrict as he caught the glint in the Frenchman's eye He could hardly doubt that Pagnol had spoken the truth If he had trained with the fur trappers of Canada, he had learned to save his life in Indian country—to ghost through all types of woodland, nursing each scrap of cover with the cunning of a snake He would be more than a match for Gabriel in the deadly stalking that lay ahead

The long-nosed dueling pistols, passing from hand to hand in turn, took longer to check Toby and Ollonais loaded between them, ramming the leather-jacketed bullets hard against the charge of powder, testing the well-oiled wheel locks against the flints

"I must warn the principals that both guns are hair-triggered," said McIntosh He placed both butts against the case as the seconds stepped back, and offered them with a flourish. Since Pagnol had chosen the weapons and the ground, Gabriel took the first pistol from the presiding officer and thrust it into his belt with one brief glance Both men had stripped to the waist while they waited Pagnol had even smeared his face and torso with river mud, until his whole body was the same dead-black hue Gabriel, to Toby's surprise, disdained this precaution.

"It is my duty," said McIntosh, "to ask that you gentlemen reconcile your differences before blood is spilled Mr. Thatch, you have given the challenge by posting Do you withdraw?"

"And shirk my responsibility as a citizen of Georgia?"

"The time for rhetoric is past, sir You, Captain Pagnol, have challenged according to the code. Do you withdraw?"

"As a citizen of the world," said Pagnol evenly, "I feel that dueling is pointless As a man of the world I know it is inevitable in our barbarous century I might add that I'm well aware of Mr Thatch's true reasons for challenging me That, however, is our secret Given his mentality, it is imperative that we—how does one say it?—shoot our misapprehension out."

Toby opened his eyes wide at this quiet statement, but Gabriel gave no sign that he had heard Already the journal-

ist seemed withdrawn—a desperate man, plotting his coming strategy.

"Dr. Kent, you'll escort Captain Pagnol to the south end of this island. Colonel Ollonais, you'll escort Mr. Thatch to the northern end You will place your lanterns and remain beside them When this is done, you will so indicate by shouting. When I fire my pistol, the duel has begun." McIntosh paused, and breathed deep. "There are no rules thereafter. Is that clear, gentlemen?"

"Clear as you'll ever be, Colonel," said Gabriel, and strode to the cabbage palm to draw forth his knife.

"Assume your stations!"

The journalist was first to leave the beach, with Ollonais swinging a bull's-eye lantern just ahead. The jungle seemed to engulf the two men instantly, though the lantern flickered for a moment in the tangle of water oak and wild grape Thanks to those black boots and the dense shadows of the underbrush, the Frenchman's white uniform seemed chopped off at the waist—giving him the look of an inflated ghost, floating away to some witch's rendezvous in the island's heart.

"When you're ready, Doctor——"

Toby snatched up the remaining bull's-eye, nodded to McIntosh, and stalked away in turn Pagnol, babying the knife in one palm, slashed at a palm frond with one full-armed stroke, and dogged Toby's heels.

"Is one permitted to observe a path of sorts?"

"Of course As you'll see, the ground is fairly clear, once you climb out of this ruck of palmetto You can walk from end to end of King's Island in three minutes, if you stick to the highest ground"

"Are you suggesting a plan of attack for me, Dr. Kent?"

Toby shrugged off the question and plunged ahead. As he had noted, the underbrush thinned rapidly once they had climbed from the rich muck of the river level and gained the island's sandy spine Here, with only a few wind-twisted cedars and scattered palmetto clumps to give cover, a man could court death at will in the moonlight And yet a man accustomed to courting death in the open could ghost from tree to tree, orient a more cautious hunter who clung to the denser cover along the island's marshy rim, and fire at will, when a rustling palmetto frond betrayed his target

"Naturally you don't feel in the mood for conversation at this hour, Doctor."

"Naturally"

"There's something I must tell you nonetheless, on the chance that I won't return to tell you later"

Again the razor-sharp tobacco knife slashed at a palm frond

only a few inches from Toby's head. He swung the lantern with the sound, feeling his scalp prickle at the realization that Pagnol, were he so minded, could skewer him any moment with that murderous blade, as casually as a farmer butchering a shoat.

"I'm afraid we've nothing to say to each other, in the circumstances"

"On the contrary. We've a great deal to say in almost no time So I'll be brief First, we both know that Mr Thatch has undertaken to kill me tonight, out of loyalty to you Second, that the real cause of this duel is not a political difference, as McIntosh believes, but Mrs Gregory."

"We can leave Mrs Gregory out of this!"

"How can we, when she's the heart of the matter?"

Toby shrugged off the question and plunged on In a twinkling Pagnol's fist had closed on one shoulder, spinning him neatly there in the sandy earth. Pagnol's wiry body, thrust forward like a tight-coiled spring, slammed Toby's back and shoulders hard against a cedar bole The Frenchman's free hand, flicking the knife point against Toby's throat, held him there, an all-too-willing prisoner.

"Always, Doctor, you were both stubbon and brave I cannot believe you are stupid as well. Can you really think that Nancy Gregory was my mistress? Or that she plans to marry me?"

Toby struggled hard to speak, but the knife point flicked his voice into silence "Or that I paid off my debt to her father from any but friendly motives?" The Frenchman's eyes narrowed in earnest Toby could feel the steel, sharp as an ice-cold needle, all but prick his skin "True, I wished to marry her, with all my heart I will always wish it Nancy Gregory won't have me, on any terms. Must I tell you why?"

"D'you think for a moment that I care?"

"Must I tell you why, Toby Kent? Or are you still an infant in the ways of love?"

The knife point flickered in the lantern light as it dropped to Pagnol's side Toby drew a long, hard breath as they continued to stand eye to eye there in the inky shadow of the cedar.

"I'm honored by your confidence, Captain Pagnol," he said at last "Shall I call McIntosh and stop the duel?"

"By no means I expect to enjoy this man hunt quite as much as Mr Thatch"

"How can I let you risk your life if what you say is true?"

"Lead on with your lantern, sir It's my own life, you know. I'll risk it as I see fit"

"And I say I'm calling for a truce, and insisting the duel be stopped"

This time the knife point was at Toby's back, thrust just deeply enough in the fabric of Toby's coat to pink the flesh beneath "March to our station, Doctor Shout that we're ready, and no more One extra word, and I'll open your heart. I studied anatomy once I can find that organ easily."

Stumbling a little as they entered the muck again, forcing his feet through the last hundred feet of saw grass, Toby placed the lantern on a rotted palmetto stump and paused with river water lapping at his calves Pagnol, with the knife still poised, halted just behind him At that precise moment they heard Ollonais bellow his signal from the far end of the island, the voice muffled by the tangle of jungle between.

"Don't tell me a Frenchman can outshout an American, Doctor"

"I tell you this is madness."

"And I repeat that I'll enjoy it thoroughly. It's quite true that I hunted with the *coureurs de bois* in my youth Take my word for one fact more. I won't kill Mr. Thatch, if I can wound him safely."

The knife thrust a little deeper. Toby could feel warm blood now beneath his belt Instinctively, he cupped his hands and exhaled an animal bellow that more than matched Ollonais's effort. Almost instantly the sound of McIntosh's signal gun split the night, like a minor thunderclap

"*Au 'voir, M. le docteur.* Do you wish me luck?"

He turned as the pressure of the knife blade vanished—but Pagnol, too, had vanished, as though he had never been. A faint rustle in the palmettoes and a sound of swift-running feet told Toby that the Frenchman had made for the spine of the island as quickly as a hunting hound, but there was no shadow to mark his progress

And then, abruptly, the whisper of footsteps died. Toby started to lift the lantern—and remembered, just in time, that his duties as a second were rigidly defined He did venture to wade a step nearer high ground, as his eyes strove to pierce the darkness. Far off to the north he could hear Gabriel crashing through the underbrush, and guessed that the journalist had thrown caution aside in one bull-like rush for the most advantageous ambush. If Pagnol had already gained that objective, the swamp duel was almost over.

"Come and get me, Thatch!"

The shouted taunt seemed to issue almost from Toby's elbow, though he was certain that the Frenchman had dug in a good hundred feet to the north Gabriel answered with a Choctaw war whoop Straining his ears, Toby could just

hear the whisper of sand along the slope, and guessed that Pagnol, scorning caution now, was moving forward for a quick decision. And then, as ten taut minutes passed, he heard a faint stirring from the water itself, as though a porpoise were rolling in the tide. Porpoises, he knew, seldom worked this far upriver. Was it possible that Gabriel, trying a ruse of his own, had slipped into the Savannah to jump Pagnol from the rear?

"Where are you, Thatch? Are you afraid to fight?"

Again the crash of palmettoes and Gabriel's reckless war whoop Obviously the journalist had not taken to the river; yet Toby was positive that something was stirring in the darkness just offshore The night was thick as choking velvet, now that the moon had lost itself in clouds, but all his senses insisted that the *something* out there was human, that it was swimming cautiously closer to the circle of lantern light.

As casually as he could, he moved back a pace, until he was standing in the penumbra of the lantern's glow The moon had begun to show faintly around the corner of the blanketing cloud; already he could make out the mainland, and the trees along the bluff, as the refracted rays began to pick out landmarks again. The Savannah itself was still deep in darkness when Gabriel whooped one more time, from the top of the ridge.

The double report of two dueling pistols, fired almost in unison, seemed to split Toby's eardrums Cedar and palmetto came garishly alive for a flash, thanks to the sulphurous blaze of those overlapping shots Dropping instinctively to hands and knees, he realized, even then, that Gabriel's shot had whistled harmlessly overhead, and that Pagnol's—fired, no doubt, from some well-chosen shelter—had apparently found its target Crushed by that discovery, and still a little deafened by the powder blast, he did not note the explosion of phosphorescence in the river as a vast, dark shape heaved upright in the shallows. He did not hear the suck of bare feet in the mud of the riverbank until the black shape had all but pounced.

Awareness came in time to save his life, though it was woefully late Black arms, agile as twin snakes, had all but locked at his shoulders, black fingers were searching for his throat and ready to fasten there as his assailant, striving to spread-eagle him face downward in the sand, surged over his back like a nightmare made visible He remembered the old army dodge in that split-second before disaster could engulf him. Jackknifing his body at the hips, throwing all his weight forward, he sent his attacker spinning head foremost into the palmettoes He was on his feet before the man could recover,

and leaping in turn to seek some purchase on naked, dark flesh that seemed smooth as an otter's hide

For an instant they thrashed together in the palmettoes, striking blindly with fists and heels, seeking a toe or hand hold Then the huge Negro buckboarded his back in turn, and Toby somersaulted in the scrub He was on his feet in a twinkling, this time, and managed to whip across the circle of lantern light before his assailant could rise to renew the attack. Safe, for the instant, in the shadow of an oleander, he saw the moon had slipped into full view again, paling the glow of the lantern The smallest bush along the bank was bathed in daylight radiance now. There was no mistaking Priam's silhouette, as he crouched there on hands and knees, his eyeballs rolling in search of a vanished quarry.

No mistaking the boatman's animal roar, as his eyes found Toby there in the doubtful shelter of the oleander. Or the sudden twang of the knife blade that seemed to flash from nowhere, to bury itself, half-deep, at the base of the Negro's skull Or Priam's startled gasp as he slumped, rather than fell, there in the river shallows.

Pagnol stepped into the lantern light just before the moon found another cloud A pistol, still smoking faintly, swung by a lanyard at his right wrist He smiled at Toby without speaking, then bent to turn the slave face up on the muddy bank

"Fortunately for you, Doctor, I was able to lure Mr. Thatch near enough to be of help to you afterward"

Toby found he had steadied himself with a hand at the Frenchman's shoulder He stared down at what was left of Priam, his mind still fumbling for an exit from fear—a fear no less real, now that its cause had been struck down

"I suspected something on this order from the moment I recognized this black fellow," said Pagnol. "My suspicions were confirmed when he left us with such alacrity, just before the duel Therefore, as you've seen, I arranged to fight as near your lantern as possible Mr Thatch proved a willing collaborator If you'll climb that slope, you'll find him lying in a small clearing, with a bullet in his arm My examination was superficial, but I don't think the bone is broken" Toby found his voice, though it was only a grotesque croak. "Why'd you—come back here? You should have—gone to McIntosh"

"According to the code, yes According to my peculiar notions, your life was rather more important than punctilio"

"But how could you know that he——?" Toby, still groping for mental purchase, gestured vaguely at the inert mass that was Priam

"Surely you realize that the Bristols had you marked for

murder some time ago? Naturally they wanted an ideal moment, to turn suspicion from their doorstep. What better chance than tonight—with a lantern to guide your murderer and a French interloper near by to blame the crime on later?"

"You said the Bristols, Captain——"

"Precisely With special emphasis on Bristol's blackguard son."

"But Priam was Mrs Gregory's slave!"

"Are you still stupid enough to consider Nancy Gregory your enemy?"

"She gave Priam to me—months ago."

"And that makes her an accomplice, in your book. Has it occurred to you that Priam had other masters before Mrs. Gregory purchased him? Or that he might be more loyal to those earlier trainers than to you? Or, finally, that he might be accepting their orders and their bribes?"

"Are you telling me that he belonged to Harvey Bristol once?"

"In Havana, Doctor—at the war's end The names and the dates are in the auction record, for any man to read. In fact, I'd say that Harvey Bristol could exorcise several questions that are troubling your sleep these days. Why don't you try to force out a few answers?"

"Why don't you take me to Gabriel?"

Pagnol shrugged "As you will, Doctor But you'll remember the suggestion, I think. You'll rise to it—sooner than you expect. After all, Harvey Bristol is in Savannah"

"There's a wounded man in that scrub! Will you lead me to his side?"

"The wound will keep, Toby Kent I can't say as much for your—misconceptions They'll strangle you in time."

Pagnol had already plunged into the palmettoes, with the lantern high in one fist. Toby stumbled in his wake, with Priam's black fingers still tingling at his throat, though Priam himself lay dead in the shallows behind them From the ground above Gabriel's shout of welcome had an encouraging timbre for a former enemy

"Perhaps I can help you dress the wound, Doctor," said the Frenchman "I'm sure your probe will find the bullet in record time You see, I *was* a student of anatomy once You might say the fact saved your friend's life tonight, as well as your own"

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In the moonlit glade on King's Island Gabriel had submitted to Toby's knife without a whimper In the flatboat he had rested quietly enough as they coasted down river to the depot, with Priam's body tumbled forward under a pile of gunny sacking. . . . Now, as he lay on the clinic cot, with Roy's fingers locked at his shoulder, the journalist seemed his usual talkative self, while Toby cleansed the wound a second time and strapped on a fresh dressing.

"Where's my lucky adversary? I'd like to congratulate him in person."

"You needn't joke too strenuously," said Toby. "One inch higher and to the left and we'd have brought you home with Priam."

"I'm still waiting for an explanation on Priam"

"And I've told you that you must rest awhile. Explanations will come tomorrow."

"At least permit me to congratulate Pagnol."

Toby offered a glass to the journalist, in lieu of an answer. Gabriel sipped it gingerly, grimacing as he tasted the opiate.

"You won't believe I enjoyed myself, even in defeat At least believe that I had your interests at heart. Even if I was mistaken about the Frenchman."

"I believe you, Gabe Now, if you'll just rest quietly——"

"Is it true that he rides to Charleston tomorrow, to sail for France?"

"So he informed me, when we parted on the island. I'm disposed to take his word."

Gabriel turned a baleful eye on Roy. "Did *you* know that the fellow had no intention of marrying your sister?"

"For some time," said Roy. "Nancy isn't in a marrying mood these days I might add that Pagnol has estates abroad that he'd forfeit if he married outside of France Not that an aristocrat's property will be worth much, with a revolution brewing there, but——"

"You might have told me that sooner, Roy."

"You might have asked me, before stopping a bullet"

"Pro oris infanta," said Gabriel "Or is my Latin worse than usual, gentlemen?" He yawned cavernously, and, while the two doctors hovered at his bedside, dropped into a deep, easy slumber

"At least he enjoys his affairs of honor," said Roy. "I wish I could say as much"

Toby glanced up quickly, but Roy's face was impassive

as he cleared Gabriel's bedside table of basin and bandages. "Who are you fighting?"

"Who else but Harvey Bristol. Or hadn't you heard that he's insulted the Darby name?" Roy dropped the formal phrase with the lightest of ironic inflections "Remember I'm not immune to facts, Toby, even if I do live for my laboratory"

"I've brought Gabe back alive Don't make me go through the same procedure I've enough to fight, without shooting Harvey Bristol—after he's shot you."

"There's no way to avoid challenging him, Toby. You must see that"

"Unless I challenged him first."

"He won't fight you, and you told his father publicly that you wouldn't fight *him*, except with your fists. Besides, it's my wife he's insulted—not yours"

"If you think for a moment——" Toby swallowed the rest hastily He had been on the point of saying that Martha Darby had been as guilty as Harvey himself

"I'm not defending Martha," said Roy "Not to you, at any rate The three of us know one another too well for that, I'm afraid." His voice was as steady as his level eyes, which continued to regard Toby calmly "The outside world's another matter They were seen together at the Planters' Hotel in Charleston, Harvey's boasting that she—that she shared his quarters there Can't you see I must kill him for that, if we're both to go on living in Savannah?"

"Have you posted a challenge?"

"There'll be no posting this time—and no rhetoric, à la Gabriel I'll challenge him in his own house Now, if you'll serve as my second, and Harvey's well enough to see us"

Toby's eyes dropped first as they walked out of the hospital together He was obscurely grateful for the dark tunnel of mulberry leaves that shut out the moonlight, for the all-but-contented silence that indicated Roy had made up his mind, once and for all The code of a Georgia gentleman, he knew, was inexorable; in a way, its very rigidity made for peace of a sort . He glanced just once at Roy when they emerged into Wright Square, but his friend's smile was still a marvel of tranquillity We might be walking out on another case together, he thought—never to a rendezvous with eternity

"Savannah never seemed cleaner," said Roy "It's hard to believe we'll be fighting plague day after tomorrow—or perhaps this midnight"

"You said Harvey was ill When did you hear?"

"Only this evening, when I rode into town Old Matthew has bedded him down at home and left him to the butler's

care. At the moment I understand that the father must drill his private army at the Bristol warehouse. In the meantime, the son must recover as best he can."

"Surely someone is treating him."

"Tyree has the case, I believe"

"Perhaps we should query him before we go calling You can hardly challenge a man in a sickbed."

But Roy's jaw had already set in a determined line. "I'm checking that sickbed with my own eyes. How do we know the monkey isn't shamming?" He pulled up short, under the canopy of a flowering China tree, at the corner of the square. "I'm a fool, of course, asking you to come with me If they did bribe Priam to murder you——"

"We've yet to prove that, Roy. This may be our opportunity"

"You think its worth the chance, then?"

"Even if I didn't, would I let you go in that house alone?"

Roy brooded on that for a moment as they followed the wooden sidewalk that led to the Bristol mews "I've heard from a dozen sources that old Matthew is drilling his rednecks to fight us tomorrow if we dare to cross his property line. Surely he'll have a few guards posted at his own door"

"We've stared down Bristol's rednecks before. We'll stare 'em down tonight"

But Toby felt a cold premonition of disaster close about them both when they paused just outside the Bristol gate-posts, and he guessed that Roy, for all his iron courage, was just as perturbed Outwardly, the façade of the Bristol mansion seemed innocent enough—blank-windowed, and apparently empty as a tomb. Yet it was impossible that old Bristol, for all his addled concentration on his warehouse, would be stupid enough to leave his home unguarded Or that Bristol's son, no matter how ill, would fail to keep a weather eye open for intruders

"From this angle," said Roy, "you'd swear that they'd surrendered and left Savannah. Did you ever see a house that looked more deserted?"

"For all we know, there's a squirrel rifle at every window and an eye dead on the sight"

"Shall we put it to the test?"

"Whenever you like"

But Roy held back an instant longer "One question more, Toby, before we turn ourselves into targets What did Gabriel mean, when he asked me if Nancy intended to marry Pagnol?"

"Gabe has a thirst for knowledge that's never satisfied It'll kill him faster than alcohol"

"Don't sidestep me. Did Gabe try to shoot Pagnol for your sake?"

Toby shrugged "Our friend the journalist is also a romantic, despise that cynic's armor He honestly believes that Nancy"—he swallowed hard, and forced the next words deliberately—"he believes we should marry. You know what your father wrote in his diary. Gabe has taken the words quite literally."

"They were so intended."

"Perhaps. But do you mind if I stick to my own interpretation?"

"Some people," said Roy, with his eyes on the moonlit Bristol portico, "should have their heads examined. To say nothing of their hearts"

"We're putting our heads in a lion's mouth," said Toby. "Never mind our hearts"

"I'm remembering I may be dead tomorrow," said Roy. "In the meantime, I want you to know that you'd still make an ideal brother-in-law" He glanced quickly, almost shyly, at Toby, and then walked straight down the moon-drenched path that led to the Bristol doorway.

Dogging his friend's heels instantly, Toby let his eyes range the Bristol window frames—if only to guess from which quarter the shot might come when they were recognized But there were no shots, and no signs of life within the house, as Roy gained the portico and slammed hard on the ponderous brass knocker. At least we're covered by the portico, thought Toby; they can't rake us from side windows Unless they shoot down through the fanlight—or unless that door has a judas . . The echo of Roy's knocking seemed to boom back from emptiness. Even when Roy's fist supplemented the knocker, there was no response from within

"Can the house really be empty?"

"Perhaps Harvey's gone down to the docks"

"Surely they'd leave a butler to answer the door"

Roy's fist hammered the panel, and the door swung open under the impact—sighing a little on its hinges as it revealed the tall foyer, highlighted here and there with candles burned down in their sconces, and empty as a stage setting after the actors have gone Flattening instantly against the door panel, —a movement which Roy duplicated, just as naturally,—Toby stared hard at that deceptive emptiness, certain that it was a trap Without glancing across the wide-open cave mouth of the door, he knew that Roy shared his bewilderment.

"They couldn't know we were coming at this exact hour"

"That's true enough" Roy's words were only the ghost of a whisper "And yet, someone must be in there."

Toby cursed under his breath, even as he kicked off his boots and cocked the derringer nested in his right-hand coat-tail. Inching forward cautiously, remembering to move crab-wise along the foyer wall, he entered the Bristol mansion as boldly as he could. Roy, paralleling his move on the opposite wall, reached the wide-open library door and vanished within. Again Toby waited for the scuffle, or the shot, that did not come. Roy himself appeared in a moment, his slender body taut against the lintel.

"Empty as the moon, Dr. Kent."

"So's the dining room, so far as I can see."

"Perhaps old Matthew sent his slaves upriver."

"You mean—he's closed the house?"

"How else can you explain this?"

"When a man closes his town house, and holes in at his dock, he doesn't leave his front door on the latch."

"Perhaps the butler's in the kitchen, and didn't hear our knock."

"Do you remember his name?"

"Abner, I think."

"Abner, are you there!"

Both Toby and Roy dropped to the shelter of an armchair, there in the vast silence of Matthew Bristol's library, though both were obscurely relieved by the vehemence of Toby's shout.

"Try the kitchens, to be sure."

Still hugging the walls, they scouted the butler's pantry, the kitchens beyond, the scullery and the storage porch that opened to the sandy back stoop. All were empty—and abandoned to their emptiness. Toby's searching eye caught a dozen signs: a door, swaying gently in the night breeze from the Savannah, a half-open cupboard that had apparently been rifled with more haste than thoroughness, a pot that still simmered forlornly above a bed of dying coals . . .

"Bristol's slaves weren't dismissed, Roy. They left, in a body, for reasons of their own."

"Could it be a trap for us, even now?"

"I don't see how. As you just remarked, we were hardly expected tonight."

"Perhaps we'll find the answer upstairs."

"Drop your boots, and we'll go up together. Don't forget to nurse the wall until we're sure."

"How could old Matthew be so careless?"

"My guess is that he left a guard, of a sort. They must have turned tail, along with the house slaves."

They worked up the stairwell as they spoke, testing each step for a telltale creak, though their precautions had begun

to seem meaningless long before they reached the bedroom level above Again it was evident that the house had been abandoned in a rush Candle sconces, burned close to their sockets, but still guttering brightly enough, spotted the darkness of the upper halls, a dinner tray, tossed rather than placed on a serving table on a landing, spilled napkin and wineglass to an otherwise spotless carpet Even the bedroom doors stood open at raffish angles, as though the departing household staff had simply turned their backs and scuttled, without daring to look behind

"What d'you make of it, Toby?"

"So far, I haven't dared to think."

But even as he spoke Toby drew in his breath, and knew—before he dared to meet his friend's eyes—that Roy had duplicated that sharp intake The hand on the carpet, the pudgy fingers relaxed in the fine foam of lace at the nightgown's wrist, was still as a newly washed corpse there in the warm spill of candlelight The arm to which the hand belonged, lax as some plaster effigy, in the half-open bedroom door, was relaxed, frozen in the same dreadful repose. Hand and arm—and they needed but one extra step to verify their suspicion—belonged to Harvey Bristol Robbed of dignity even in death, the heir to the Bristol domain had simply tumbled, like a weary sack, across the bedroom lintel, his nightshirt twisted grotesquely about his bulging thighs, his eyes rolled wildly upward under a tilted nightcap.

"He's dead right enough "

"Dead as he'll ever be Can't you see what killed him? And why this house is empty?"

Roy was already on his knees beside the body, untying the drawstrings of young Bristol's gown Not that either doctor needed a diagnosis to complete that first rough picture The bloated neck, the blotches, like stale blood, and large as crown pieces, that covered chest and shoulders, the giant swelling at the groin, made the textbook pattern complete Harvey Bristol, felled by the ax of the plague, had simply collapsed at his bedroom door as he fumbled his way toward the open air—a crazy, final burst of energy that was one of the terminal spasms of the disease. The Bristol slaves and such guards as old Matthew had left behind had vanished, just as simply, long before their erstwhile master's delirium had exploded into this climax

"It seems you've been spared a challenge, Roy "

Roy, still kneeling beside the body, did not raise his eyes. Toby wondered if the same thought had crossed his friend's mind at that instant Justice, he repeated, had seldom struck so swiftly—or with such peculiar meaning.

"Someone must call Tyree"

"Why bother? You're both doctors—can't you smell death when it's under your nose?"

Roy did not stir as Martha half-swayed, half-walked through the bedroom door. It was Toby who took her hand and led her to a settee across the hall, ignoring her blind stagger as he ignored the reek of brandy that surrounded her. The hand in his seemed to burn with a separate fire. Even as he tried to free his fingers, another part of his brain was noting the wildly jumping pulse at her wrist, the saffron hue of those staring eyeballs.

"Why don't you ask how I came here tonight? Aren't you even curious?" She swayed again, and tried to rise, under Toby's gently restraining hands "You *must* have been curious, climbing upstairs on tiptoe like schoolboys."

"Control yourself, Martha," said Roy. "I'll take you home in a moment."

"You'll never take me home again I'm through with the Darbys and Savannah."

Roy, completing his examination, ignored that half-hysterical scream Without quite looking at his wife, he rose from the carpet, brought a blanket from the bedroom, and covered Harvey Bristol's body where it lay

"Someone must tell old Matthew. I'll report to Tyree after I've taken Martha home"

"Haven't you heard a word I've been saying, Roy?"

Roy faced his wife directly at last, and Toby stood aside by instinct as he read his friend's eyes "I think we've seen enough tonight, Martha You can spare me the rest"

"But I'm leaving you, and I'm telling you why. You'll have to listen"

"Did anyone see you enter this house?"

"Does it matter if they did?"

"May I ask why you came?"

"You may indeed, Roy." Martha's fingers, clawing at her temples, resembled the talons of a fevered bird Watching her strangely bloated face dissolve into a mist of tears, Toby wondered why he had ever considered her pretty—or even desirable At this moment Martha Darby was that most pathetic of spectacles, a woman who is beginning to crumple from within, under the twin assault of nerves and liquor.

"I came here tonight to save Toby's life, if I could."

"You *knew*—about Priam?"

"Naturally I knew. Harvey used Priam more than once—to help our plans along I never thought he'd use him to—to strike at Toby."

"Think what you're saying, Martha!"

"Harvey's been my lover. You must have guessed that. He was my lover in Havana during the war. Yes, and he loved me here in Savannah, before he took it into his head to court Nancy." Martha stared down at the twisted figure beneath the blanket with strangely impersonal eyes. Her voice was almost calm now, though her fingers continued to torture the sweat-stained hair at her temples.

"Never mind that How did you learn about Priam?"

"I said he was my lover. We worked together too. Priam was one of our—our instruments"

Light began to burst in Toby's mind He found that his hand had closed on Martha's shoulder, that he had entered the questioning far more eagerly than Roy.

'So Harvey Bristol was the raider who gobbled our ships —not Pagnol"

"Naturally. Why didn't you guess as much long ago?"

"Think what you're saying, Martha!"

Toby took the floor as gently as he could. "You *did* say that Pagnol was in league with Nancy"

"Dust in your eyes, Toby I never thought it would blind you so completely"

"You planted that note in the library at Sangaree?"

"Priam hid it in the bookcase, where you'd be sure to find it Why did you believe it, Toby? When a man's in love with a woman, as you loved Nancy, he should believe the best of her, not the worst"

Toby brushed the interpolation aside "And the night we blew that corsair from the water——"

"Right again I sent the message, telling them that the *Darby Belle* was sailing Just as I sent the other messages. Harvey paid me for each prize he took"

"How long has he operated as a freebooter?"

"Long enough to grow rich at it. Ever since his wife died in England and left him enough to set up headquarters in Nassau. . . . Why are you two schoolboys staring? Piracy's an old American trade"

"You helped him, Martha That's what I can't get over."

She turned scornfully to Roy and Roy's half-whispered words. "At least I opened Toby's eyes—he might thank me for that I could have left Savannah without a word. Now that Harvey's dead you might never have guessed."

"Did old Matthew know of this?"

"Naturally not He was willing enough to accept Harvey's help He never guessed the source Matthew Bristol's a fool, but he's honest."

"What did you do with your—your percentage?" Roy had

stumbled over the word. He forced the next query through set lips "Is it here—in Savannah?"

"Don't think I'm that naïve, Roy. No one but I knows where that money is hidden No one will ever know. But I'll tell you this—it's more than enough to rescue me from your world"

"If you think for a moment I'm letting you escape——"

"I never belonged to you, Roy. I only seemed to belong. Now that I'm ready to go on, you can't hold me for a moment."

"Has it occurred to you that you're a criminal, under Georgia law?"

"Perhaps But you're the last man in Georgia to brand me. You've the Darby name to think of."

"You're coming home with me, Martha. Tomorrow, when you're in your right mind——"

"I was never saner, Roy"

But even as Martha spoke, her wildly roving eyes betrayed her words Wrenching free of Toby's detaining hand, she swayed into the full circle of candlelight at the stairhead and faced both doctors defiantly.

"Don't say that I'm ill I *know* I'm ill. But I'll—live it down, Roy"—her voice seemed to blur as she groped for words—the hand that touched the baluster was trembling violently—"just as I—lived you down And the fact I—wanted Toby—and couldn't have him, ever——"

"It's all right, Martha. You may be ill, but we'll see you through"

"I'll fight my—my own illness, thank you Good night to you—gentlemen." She all but spat the last word. "I won't wish you luck"

She reeled as she went down the stair and all but pitched over the banister For all that, she was amazingly light on her feet, and faster than Roy's pursuing hands, his anguished cry

"Come back, Martha!"

"Never in this world!"

The taunt was shouted from the lower hall. As Toby rocketed downstairs on Roy's heels, he heard the door to the portico cannon shut, the tattoo of Martha's heels on the slatted sidewalk outside Even before he could reach the outer air he knew that Roy's pursuit would be useless—that any remedy Roy Darby might offer his wife tonig[illegible] come too late Th[illegible] been no mistaking that [illegible] and [illegible] it, or the witch ma[illegible] [illegible] into the moonlight

proof of the disease that was destroying her—as it had destroyed Harvey Bristol.

With the emptiness of death behind him and the wide, moon-silvered square at his feet, Toby paused for an instant on the Bristol portico to watch Martha Darby's last race with destiny. Her hair had come unbound as she reeled from the house. Her flying feet, stirring whorls of dust in the roadway, seemed to spurn the ground as she threw all her failing strength into a last effort to outdistance Roy. Already her clawing fingers—driven to this extremity by the fever that raged within her—had raked her dress to tatters, for it was a symbolic fact that the plague, even as it drove its victims shrieking into the street, drove them to strip themselves of every garment, that they might leave the world as naked as they entered.

"Wait for me, Martha!"

Her derisive laughter seemed to shake the rooftrees of the square as she raced toward Bull Street, stripping her bodice as she ran. Roy caught her, where street and square joined, before she could quite twitch out of the garment As he ran down at last to join them, Toby saw them roll together in the roadway before a cloud of dust, red as Georgia's heart, even by moonlight, rose to engulf them.

Martha escaped him one more time and ran blindly to the heart of the square. There she seemed to freeze, as though turned to stone by the wand of some invisible sorcerer. Limbs rigid, both fists raised to heaven, she stood poised for an instant. The moonlight, pouring over her all-but-naked body, aided the horrid illusion that this was no longer living flesh, but some pagan statue. A Lilith rising from darkness to light, one with man's first groping toward human estate. A coldly ardent Lilith, offering her marbled body to the world—and doomed to wait endlessly for her fulfillment.

Even when she fell, it was like a statue falling. An upraised arm, rigid as stone, seemed to flail the rising dust cloud for a second more, and then lay still.

Toby was at her side almost as quickly as Roy, but the younger doctor had already lifted Martha in his arms. A glance was all he needed to tell him that the black bubble of plague, bursting in her brain, had killed her instantly.

"This morning," said Roy, "she was as well as I This noon she complained of a slight fever—and refused all treatment. This midnight she's dead." His tone was dry, and oddly empty of emotion "I'm sure she didn't mean to—to run away. It was the disease that drove her into the open."

"Of course, Roy."

"The things she said tonight—whether they're true or false—must go no further."

"Whatever she was, it's our secret. She's beyond blame now—along with young Bristol."

"It's kind of you to say that, Toby I know you mean it." Roy still hesitated, there in the full wash of the moonlight, with his wife's sagging body in his arms But Roy's tone, for all his physical wavering, had the same clinical detachment. "Perhaps I'll understand this in the morning Perhaps I'll even decide how I—should feel toward her memory"

You'll know that she's better dead, thought Toby In time you'll even realize that this is your luckiest moment since your birth Her life with you was an endless lie, now that she's confessed the lie, what could you do with her living?

Aloud he said only, "We must carry her to the dock, Roy. Let me help you"

"She's my burden still," said Roy.

Knowing that argument would be futile—and any attempt at consolation worse than futile—Toby fell into step beside his friend They marched thus down the length of Bull Street, through the moon-dappled shadows of Johnson Square, and so to the open sweep of The Bay It was a bizarre journey. Savannah lay about them like a dead city, staring at their progress from empty window frames. But Toby knew that most of Savannah's frightened citizens were at home tonight, doing their poor best to build a wall against death The reek of sulphur was everywhere; at every street corner he caught the acrid smell of vinegar, and knew that more than one housewife had spread soaked sheets across door and window, to turn disease from her threshold

The black death had struck twice in the upper town—no one could tell when it might strike again, or when the plague carts would rumble up to these same proud porticoes to gather their ghastly freight Thanks to his study of the disease abroad, and the resounding approval of his methods at the Town Council this morning, Toby had every hope of confining the disease to Muskrat Town But such hopes would be cold comfort to Savannah tonight Tomorrow—when news of Harvey's and Martha's deaths was common property—there would be a mass exodus to country estates and country air .

Roy's boots echoed on the dock as they skirted the warehouses of the depot and walked toward the hospital ship, riding easily at her cable, just off the stringpiece.

"You can hardly take her aboard"

"I realize that We'll write her death certificate on the spot, and put her in the skiff for the island"

"But, Roy——"

"We've no other choice, Toby. We burned five bodies from Muskrat Town Tyree will order Bristol's body burned"

Toby bowed his head to the obvious wisdom. All the plague victims, so far, had been ferried to the beach of Lazaretto Island and destroyed on lightwood pyres built at the water's edge Custom and fear, joining quaking hands at a plague deathbed, decreed that there be no burial, no funeral ceremony, when a stevedore died in Muskrat Town, or a slave screamed away his life in plantation quarters: the victim was simply destroyed, along with his mattress and his bedclothes As a doctor, Toby could only applaud his friend's insistence that the same harsh rule apply to the Darbys.

The death skiff, unused now for several days and limed to the gunwales, bobbed on a long painter at the dock's end. Neither doctor spoke as Toby drew the little boat alongside. Roy placed the body under the thwarts—gently enough, but with no air of ceremony. For a moment they stood at the stringpiece staring down at Martha's face Then, moving as one, they covered the body in a coarse cotton shroud freshly soaked in lime

The extra-long painter, writhing like a water-snake, glided easily from dock to river after Toby had thrust the skiff free. Both doctors stood quietly on the stringpiece until the skiff had bobbed into the tug of the current and the painter stood taut at the mooring. Tyree would send his own death to that same skiff tonight, thought Toby With morning, a brace of slaves, too frightened to speak, would tow that freight to the pyre on Lazaretto Island It was appropriate that Harvey and Martha make that last journey together.

"First I'll report to Tyree," said Roy. "Then I'll burn my clothes at the washhouse door, and join you aboard the hospital ship. You've had a long night, Toby, but I'm afraid you're needed there now."

As Roy spoke, they walked down the dock to the gangway that gave access to the quarter-deck of the *Lady Oglethorpe*. For the first time Toby noticed the light at the afterhouse windows, the wider blur of radiance amidships, where young Dr. Appleby had presided so valiantly over their floating hospital

"So we've new cases aboard. That's only natural" Natural and inevitable, he added silently If the plague could strike on the Savannah bluff, it could run riot in Muskrat Town

"If you want to rest," said Roy, "I can take over tomorrow."

"You're the one who needs rest tonight"

"I'm afraid I'd rather work, Toby." Roy did his best to

force a smile "I'm also afraid that rest will be a memory for us both for some time to come."

"Perhaps we should be thankful, Roy."

"Perhaps we should."

Toby, with one foot already on the gangplank, put a hand on his friend's arm "If words would help—if *anything* would help you now——"

"Martha destroyed herself," said Roy "It's as simple as that She loved life too much to count the cost Don't think I haven't understood her from the beginning. Don't think I wouldn't have saved her if I could"

"No man could have saved her, Roy."

"No man at all. And don't think I'll let that discovery destroy *me*" Roy hesitated, then went on resolutely "I've things to live for outside myself Work that's more important than I'll ever be Martha had nothing beyond her own desire" His voice broke on that, and he strode down the dock in the moonlight, pausing, just once, to stare at the skiff bobbing at its long painter Toby, pulling his eyes away from that same quarter, hurried up the gangplank.

Appleby, looking almost cheerful in the wan lamplight amidships, emerged briskly from the doorway that led to the long sick bay. "I sent Billy to look for you, Doctor Our first new case came aboard hardly an hour after we'd warped in"

"Have there been others?"

"Three in all. One moribund, the second too early to diagnose. The third's a textbook case I've already lanced the boil"

Toby let out a sigh of pure relief Three cases, now that the hospital ship had dared to appear in Savannah roadstead, were not too alarming The sick of Muskrat Town, nursing their own fears in silence, had simply converged on this floating asylum now it was within their reach.

"Any false alarms?"

"The usual number, sir I dosed 'em, and had Billy chase 'em overside D'you think it's safe to stay moored tomorrow? Once we're outfitted, we could anchor in mid-channel and pick our own patients"

"That may not be practical, if this business moves to the epidemic stage." Toby wondered if Appleby had had time to observe the body they had brought to the skiff, and decided not to raise the question Already Martha's death seemed curiously remote. The living sufferers aboard were far more important now.

"I hope you've lured a few assistants aboard"

"Only Maum Bonnie, Doctor—and Mrs Gregory They were waiting when we docked Didn't even go up to the clinic."

"Did you say *Mrs. Gregory?*"

"Why look surprised, Toby? After all, you sent for me."

But he could only stare, in dumb wonderment, as Nancy walked out of the sick bay and paused on the deck with the lamps behind her. He knew he would always remember her thus—coifed to the eyes in spotless white, offering that familiar smile that hovered between friendship, malice—and an emotion he had never dared to define And he knew that he would hate himself always for his stammered lie. . . .

"It's time for our last accounting, Mrs. Gregory. *That's* why I sent for you"

"Let's settle our score with death first, Doctor You already know I'm a good secretary—and a good field hand. You'll find I can be a good nurse as well"

But he was still staring, still unable to add a word to that one harsh statement, when she returned to the sick bay Then he caught Appleby's eye, and felt his authority descend again, like a visible mantle Nancy, reading his message at Sangaree, had believed that he needed her. that was enough for now. Their settlement—and his expiation—could await a better moment

"I believe we might lance another boil, Doctor."

"With Mrs. Gregory's assistance, perhaps?"

Appleby's country grin was more than refreshing "Who d'you think assisted with that first patient, sir? You'd be surprised what Mrs. Gregory can stand."

"That's where you're wrong, Walter" Toby breathed deep of the fresh salt air and felt his purpose grow clearer with each word. "I'm through being surprised at Mrs Gregory—or myself."

And then, before his bewildered young assistant could think him completely insane, he strode toward the sick bay and the tall figure in white that waited patiently beside the first cot.

v

Twenty-nine deaths—all but two of them from Muskrat Town Twenty-nine funeral pyres, lighted on Lazaretto Island in nine days' time Toby's pen checked the list one more time before he closed the ledger on his desk in the Darby depot. Epidemic had been too strong a word for the threat they had fought during those nine terror-ridden days, though the threat had always lurked in the background . Twenty-nine deaths, and almost fifty unmistakable cases The hospital ship was filled with convalescents now, Lazaretto Island housed a dozen more who were probably past help. The threat itself—and he

let his fist pound out that small triumph on the ledger—was all but burned away as of now—scotched in sulphur fumes, stopped dead at the quarantine station down river. Isolated in an iron ring of guards and flaring lightwood torches there on the Bristol docks.

Yes, it was a small triumph—as medical miracles went. He had proved to Savannah that fire and brimstone, cleverly applied, could stop plague in its tracks—a simple regime that the Chinese had practiced for centuries More important, he had convinced even the diehards that Matthew Bristol—and Bristol's habit of outfitting slaves at his dockside—had given that same plague its point of entry. The grim circle of vigilantes, who had penned old Bristol and his wavering platoon of rednecks in the Bristol warehouse for nine days, was proof enough that the lesson had registered

Most important of all, the council had realized, rather belatedly, that Muskrat Town itself was a stain on Savannah's doorstep. From his open office window Toby could see the long white files of the tent village on Hutchinson's Island where the city fathers had given the inhabitants of the lower town an asylum, of sorts, until their rotting mudsill could be drained, and diked, and remade into a fit habitation for man.

With the last rat smoked from Muskrat Town, and the town itself a maze of gray ghost shanties awaiting the wrecker's ax, he could sit in his station atop the Savannah bluff and devote a whole morning to the affairs of the Darby Company without a twinge of conscience With Roy in charge of the hospital ship, and Nancy ordered firmly to bed for twelve hours' rest, he could even pause to brood over his future—and the letter that had just sealed that future once and for all

Holding the memory of Nancy at arm's length and the tireless aid she had given him, he forced his mind to the letter itself All through those nine hectic days, when his mind spun with weariness and he could no longer find the strength to curse his blindness where Nancy was concerned, he had clung grimly to his original resolve, though he had wavered more than once He had been able to snatch a moment alone with her—had their conversation strayed beyond the iron compulsion of their battle with death—things might have ended otherwise. He might even have burst into an avowal which would have made this laboriously written letter needless Certainly no avowal of error could be more abject than the words under his hand

He read those words one more time before he signed—though he knew that he could recite them down to the last bitter comma twenty years from now

MY DEAR MRS GREGORY·

Though it is perhaps too soon to do more than Hope, I will dare to predict that the worst of the Battle with the Plague is now behind us Therefore, it is my Duty, as well as my Privilege, to set down my future Plans, as they affect the Darby Company and your own Prospects

Permit me to say, at the Outset, that I am well aware of your immense contribution to the Success of our Venture—and that only False Pride (and a misunderstanding that went even deeper than pride) kept me from yielding sooner . . .

Pride, and his own blindness. Perhaps he should burn the letter and bend his knee in person She would be wakening now in the windswept eyrie atop the warehouse which he and Roy had refitted as her impromptu bedroom, that she might be near the hospital ship and yet apart from it He could see the small square of her window from where he sat, the curtain blown outward by the breeze . . He put the temptation firmly from his mind and read on:

Ignorance (that mother of War and Madness) held me in thrall from the beginning where you were concerned Whispering her evil Blandishments, she led me to believe that you were unworthy of my Trust Thank Heaven I did not give voice to my Worst Suspicions Is it enough, if I own myself in Error from the start—and resign your father's Property into your Capable Hands?

So much for his surrender, his admission that she was, after all, the stronger So much for the admission that he had hearkened to other counselors when he might have profited from her wisdom Oddly enough, it had been easier to pen these avowals than to set down the next paragraph.

Leary has the complete figures on the second, and final year of the Darby Company If you will inspect them with an Open Mind, you will see that we came close to showing a Profit, after all—despite my Foolhardy Generosity toward our Tenant Farmers—and my Tendency (which you so often Deplored) to buy New Vessels, and new upriver Land, rather than store up a Surplus for a Bad Season

Had this threat of Plague permitted us to empty our Warehouses of their Potential Wealth—were our Tobacco and Rice now enroute to Le Havre and the Pool of London—I might yet surrender our Ledgers to you with a Credit, rather than a Debit, Balance Will you believe me when I repeat that I would surrender them, Nonetheless?

Shortly after you read this (and depending only on the Danger of Disease in our midst) I shall depart Savannah for the Up-Country and the Western Reserves I shall resign my clinic practice to your brother and to Dr Walter Appleby, even as I resign the Darby Company to you Will you please accept this

letter as an Earnest Expression of that Intention—which, as I say, I shall translate into Reality at the earliest possible Moment?

God bless you and your Ventures, Nancy Gregory—and may your Future be happier than our Shared Past! I would close this Epistle with a Softer Sentiment, if I dared—but Soft Words, as you know too well, never came easily between us

Y'r Humble & Obd't Servant
TOBIAS KENT

He sat at his window awhile, watching the slave go down the ramp with the letter held before him in a cleft stick, he watched the Negro's bare feet scamper up the stair that led to Nancy's impromptu bedroom door atop the warehouse. Counting those steps one by one, almost imagining he could hear the Negro's knock, he felt his fists relax only when the slave appeared again, swinging that same cleft stick gayly, now that his errand was over. . . . She's reading it now, he thought, with a sharp constriction of the heart. She's smiling quietly to herself, now that the battle's over. Perhaps she's not even troubling to smile Perhaps she was confident, from the start, that she'd best me at my own game.

He stared for a moment more at his domain, as though he were viewing it for the last time. The captain's walk, where he had stumped away so many weary hours while he waited for an overdue sail to show in the river haze to the south. The auction shed, where he had felt his heart lift as the bidders wrangled for Darby rice and Darby leaf. The cool, shuttered cave of Nancy's office, where he had shouted her into silence, insisting that his was the only way. . . . His eye lingered for a moment more on the hospital ship, riding serenely at its twin hawsers a safe hundred feet from the dock's end Nancy was due aboard at three, for another stint of duty in the crowded sick bay If he waited a half-hour longer he could watch her emerge from the warehouse, walking like a queen with her new-found power.

He charged from the depot instantly, knowing that this was more than he could bear. If ever a man had earned a glass of Tondee's best Jamaica, that man was Dr. Tobias Kent.

There were more than a dozen oxcarts on Bull Street today and almost as many carriages Most of the merchants had dared to open their doors a crack, though people still avoided touching hands, and money for purchases was still received in vinegar jars at each doorway. Thanks to the sovereign properties of alcohol, no such precautions were taken in Tondee's taproom, even in harvest-time the bar had never been more crowded Gabriel, seated in his usual corner, shifted

the sling that held his wounded arm and made room for Toby as a matter of course.

"If the doctor stops for a noggin, I assume the worst is over. Or did you only stroll down the bluff to shake your fist at the Bristol Docks?"

"I've shaken my last fist at Bristol, thank you."

"I can't say as much for Savannah. People are still saying we wont be free of plague until his depot's burned to the ground."

"People will stop muttering if we can go another week with no new cases."

"They'll still remember that he held out in his warehouse till the end. D'you realize he's sat behind his guns for almost two weeks, and defied the whole town?"

"He's defied the whole town before, and survived."

"This time he won't be so lucky."

Toby studied Gabriel over his rum. It was not like the journalist to labor a point without reason. "If you're up to some trick, out with it. You know McIntosh won't have bloodshed. Especially now, when we're on top of our troubles."

"The fact is, I was about to send for you," said Gabriel. "Along with most of Savannah, we're about to witness a *divertissement* to warm any man's heart." He drank deep, flicking the fingers of his injured arm to indicate the mood of the crowded room. "Point one, only your forbearance and McIntosh's authority have kept our friends from Muskrat Town on leash. Point two, Bristol's warehouse would have been stormed a dozen times, if you hadn't insisted that a ring of guards could quarantine it just as easily."

"Never mind your points. What's the final one?"

"Colonel Crowther, of course. At precisely three this afternoon he's walking onto Bristol's dock with a white flag, and calling the old poker out."

"Challenging him, you mean?"

"Offering to fight him on the spot, with or without seconds, under his rednecks' guns."

Toby found that he had downed his rum without tasting it at all. It was common knowledge in Savannah that Crowther had cursed Bristol from the bluff the day Crowther's own son was received aboard Toby's hospital ship. Thanks to Toby's skill and Nancy's nursing they had brought the boy to the crisis in record time, and lanced the great, purulent boil that so often drew the whole raging focus of the disease into its heart. Packed to the eyes in cold compresses, young Crowther had thrown off his all-but-fatal fever with

time. At the moment he was convalescing, comfortably enough, under an awning on that same hospital ship.

"Isn't the colonel's challenge a bit overdue?"

"He says he'll shoot Bristol as a public service to Savannah Last night, at that very bar, he called himself a fool for not thinking of a challenge sooner."

"Are you sure you didn't inspire him?"

"Naturally I inspired him—with the aid of Tondee's finest Armagnac I, too, am a good citizen of Savannah. If I hadn't already received an honorable wound in your interest——"

"Never mind the rhetoric, Gabe We're going to McIntosh immediately. I'm stopping this if I can"

"McIntosh has agreed to act as Crowther's second, if Bristol will accept seconds," said Gabriel. "Can't you be a spectator for once and enjoy the show?"

He rose with the question and shouted for their score The taproom, Toby noted, was almost empty now as its occupants began to drift down Whitaker Street in the direction of The Bay. Joining the procession without further protest, he found he was in the grip of a strange excitement—a sense of crisis in the making that had nothing to do with Colonel Crowther, or Crowther's bizarre gesture

At first glance the whole town seemed to have poured into the esplanade this flawless April afternoon People still walked warily a safe nine feet from one another, some of the elders still wore vinegar-soaked handkerchiefs for this first timid venture into the open air. To balance such timidity, however, more than half the crowd seemed to be in various stages of intoxication, and prone to fraternize Toby frowned as he noted how many of these raffish young men were armed

"Did you plan it this way, Gabe?"

The journalist's face was a model of injured innocence "If a few young firebrands will carry sidearms, is it my affair?"

"What if they storm the warehouse?"

"What if they do? Can any sane man control spontaneous combustion?"

Toby scowled, but said nothing. Clearly Gabriel was enjoying the force he had deliberately set in motion—far too much to ponder the possible aftermaths

At the bluff's edge they paused by common consent, to stare down the Bristol ramp. This time Toby was shocked in earnest by the ominous temper of the crowd The murmur of a mob impulse was lacking so far, but he could sense the makings in a score of slitted eyes, in the deep-throated cursing—most of all, in the cheer that went up when Gabriel was recognized

"What next, Gabe?"

"The duel, of course. If old Matthew will show his head It isn't often that the public is privileged to witness a meeting of gentlemen."

But even this casual glimpse convinced Toby that the crowd had other plans. At the moment it resembled nothing so much as a lazy animal on leash, its common eye fixed on the squat, low-roofed warehouse below the bluff.

He had studied the Bristol warehouse often enough while he planned ways to rat-proof it In the busy days just gone he had not had time to observe its defenses thoroughly. it had been enough to know that honest citizens ringed the ramp and the bluff above it, each man armed with a rat club and a lightwood torch That same guardian ring held solid this afternoon, though the crowd had begun to press it here and there Toby was hardly surprised to observe a dozen lighted torches, though these blazing fat-pine knots were scarcely needed before dusk In a way, the hiss of flaming lightwood along the bluff was the final cachet on Gabriel's handiwork.

In contrast to the massed threat above, the warehouse itself seemed no threat at all, if plague rats still lurked among the Bristol tobacco hogsheads, if the stubborn old man had buried more dead with the tide, there was no outward sign. The warehouse, shuttered to its last window frame, its great loading doors padlocked, seemed abandoned to its fate Only the guardians above knew that a score of muskets were still primed and waiting behind those shutters—that the first man to step on the long loading dock would feel lead whistle through his hair

Now, as he leaned over the steep pitch of the bluff, Toby saw that two men were about to put that arsenal to the test Carrying a white flag between them, and holding their hands high to show they came unarmed, they had already left the ramp, to set foot on the first sun-faded plank of the dock itself Even at that height Toby recognized Crowther's vast white wig and McIntosh's sober-shanks walk instantly. Crowther's bellow seemed to shake the padlocks on the loading door as they strode up to face the yet-invisible enemy

"You know why I'm here, Matthew. Will you show your face and fight?"

No one stirred in the watching horde atop the bluff, though every watcher seemed to let out his breath in unison as old Bristol, buttoned to the chin and scowling like his own death mask, inched through a crack in the warehouse door The massive shoulders had never been more arrogant, the untidy

blizzard of his wig, riding like a giant cock's comb above his knotted forehead, seemed part and parcel of his madness

"Leave my dock, both of you"

"I appeal to you as a gentleman, Matthew Will you fight, or will you admit you're whipped, and leave Savannah?"

"Leave my dock, I say!"

Even Crowther recoiled a pace before that insane howl—and the recoil saved his life, with a scant inch to spare Bristol's arm seemed to lash like a striking snake; the long-barreled pistol, hidden in the folds of his coattails, spat like a snake's tongue there in the shadow of the warehouse door But Crowther had stumbled a little as he fell back; the bullet, though fired at point-blank range, merely sent his hat spinning, and served as an ideal signal to the crowd on the bluff above

Toby felt his own heart rise with that forward surge Even as his brain fought for clarity, he knew that he was howling with the others, and cheering just as madly as the first torch arched from bluff to warehouse roof In that twinkling the air seemed to rain fire. He heard a dozen bowstrings twang, and realized that as many arrows, each with a knob of blazing tar in lieu of point, had smashed into the window shutters Someone's knife had slashed a well-placed hayrick, complete with greased skids, into the ramp itself, and sent it hurtling downgrade with a torch at its heart A cheer rose as the mass of fire, smashing against a ground-floor shutter, burst into the warehouse proper with a crackling roar

"Stop the fools! Can't someone stop them?"

He knew that the voice was his own, despite its feeble croaking, though he never remembered scrambling down the ramp in Gabriel's wake He heard the journalist shout an order just after stray shots began to pepper the doorframe Matthew Bristol, spread-eagled against that door even now, seemed to collapse from within long before the first lead pellet could find his heart The first redneck musket, pitched through an open shutter in token of surrender, struck the dock planking as Toby knelt beside his enemy—though he was sure that Bristol was dead long before he sought the lifeless pulse.

"Don't waste pity on that," said Gabriel quite calmly. "He's been dead a long time, you know" He whirled back to the warehouse, cupping his good hand beside his lips to roar another order "Pitch out your muskets and follow 'em, you scuts! We've got your master, we don't want you!"

Gun butts rattled down the dock's length, in grotesque counterpoint to a mounting roar within the warehouse Sprouts of flame had begun to show along the rooftree before the last

of the Bristol henchmen could tumble to safety; the shutters, exploding outward under the thrust of the flames within, revealed a holocaust that was growing with each thrust of the river wind. The fire, devouring the tight-packed Bristol wealth, dancing merrily from hogshead to molasses barrel, from stacks of sun-dried lumber to turpentine tun, was giving the watchers an excuse to howl in earnest.

Toby met Gabriel's eyes, there on the Bristol stringpiece. "Congratulations, my friend. You planned this well "

But the journalist's grin was still seraphic, even in that smoke-stained frame. "Spontaneous combustion, Toby. Man's eternal reward, when he resists change " He was gone on that, framed in another swirling cloud as he scampered up the ramp on Crowther's heels

The crowd parted, then closed again avidly, as they bore the body through At that precise moment the warehouse roof crumbled, a geyser of sparks, arching the dock itself, plummeted among the shanties of Muskrat Town, powder-dry, now, after the long drought, and smeared to the eaves in sulphur Thank God those shanties are empty, thought Toby, watching the first flames spout skyward In a sense, it's fitting that they should burn in the same fire that destroyed the Bristol domain

And then, as he saw the fire dance madly down the bluff, he found that he was running, too, and shedding garments as he ran, until he stood at the very tip of the Bristol dock

It was too late to go back now Had a powder train been laid from this point to the Darby depot, the holocaust could hardly have moved with greater fury Sundered from the crowded bluff by that sulphurous pall of smoke, he had no choice but to plunge overside before the flames could find him Swimming for his life, and quartering deep into the current, he saw that he could still reach his own dock end, with minutes to spare.

There was no time to rage against the certainty that the Darby warehouse must go up in smoke, along with its Bristol counterpart No time to remember the fat ledgers in the depot on the bluff, and the pages of red-inked entries Leary must jot down tomorrow All his energy was focused on one object—the hospital ship moored at the Darby stringpiece, with thirty helpless patients aboard and two doctors to cast her off

There, as he had hoped, were Roy and Appleby, tugging at the heavy looped cable of the bowline There, thank God, was the white ghost his eyes ached for, running through the whorls of smoke, at the warehouse corner, stumbling just once in that long hospital gown before she gained the

stringpiece. Barely a hundred feet distant now, he opened his mouth to shout, thought better of the impulse, and dug for the stern of the *Lady Oglethorpe* with all his strength.

The smoke parted briefly, giving him a glimpse of flashing steel. He saw that Nancy had snatched a fire ax from the warehouse as she ran, saw that she was handling it like a veteran, above the fat hempen twist of the stern line A second overhand stroke, and she had parted the last strand cleanly a split second after the two figures on the deck had cast off the bowline He saw her toss the ax aside, heard her cry out as the vessel's stern swung clear—and knew that the snapping cable, tangled in her long gown as it swung free, had snapped her overside.

Her body struck the Savannah a scant ten feet from where he swam He heard her strangling intake of breath as she went under, and sounded with the trailing cable, groping for her blindly in the murky flood For an instant his own arm tangled in that hempen trap, even as his other arm tightened about her—and he felt sure they were doomed together Then, with a rending shriek, the fabric of the gown tore free Or was it Nancy's own shriek, as their heads broke surface together?

Or his own hoarse cry, just before the wildly slatting rudder of the *Lady Oglethorpe*, striking smartly just behind his ear, exploded his whole being into darkness?

vi

She was in his arms a long time, though he could no longer see her face, and the love words he whispered were lost against her cheek as they whirled downward in a black, choking tunnel without ending His voice murmured on—a voice that was not quite his own, though each word he spoke was wrenched from his heart

He was still whispering, and, despite that engrossing darkness, he knew that she could hear him perfectly, when he opened his eyes at last The darkness was still absolute, though the fire still spouted faintly there in the background He closed his eyes and lapsed into the greatest contentment he had ever known. He was still alive, and Nancy Gregory was listening at his side That was enough for now

"Easy does it," said Roy "You've been asleep a long time, Toby Not that you haven't earned a rest"

He was in his bed, in the house on Wright Square The pale white gossamer that mantled him to the chin was his familiar counterpane And the holocaust that had threatened him, when he last opened his eyes, was only the fire on the

grate, lighted against the chill of a quiet spring evening. Roy, seated at the bedside, was checking his pulse with gravely smiling eyes.

"I hope your head's stopped hurting. There isn't a ghost of a fracture "

"When did I——?"

"Eight hours ago Fortunately, Nancy's a strong swimmer, even in a nurse's gown She kept your chin above water until we could bail you both out "

"And the fire?" He could manage a few words, if they were short. He could even grasp the import of Roy's answers, if he stared steadily at the same spot on the wall, to keep the bed from whirling

"The fire burned itself out at sundown. A clean sweep, Toby Our depot as well as Bristol's." Roy just escaped smiling "Gabe and a dozen other hotheads are under arrest until it's explained If you ask me, it was worth losing the depot to make a clean start "

A clean start! Abruptly the bed settled into its accustomed spot, along with his whirling brain Yes, they could all start over now Nancy, with her father's riches—impaired, but not ruined, by this costly experiment in democracy Savannah, with its water front swept clean of disease by man's most ancient scourge He remembered the letter he had written so bravely, and tasted the dregs of his renunciation There would be no denying Nancy's claims, now that their last hope of profit had been burned away.

"The Lady Oglethorpe?"

"Moored safely at Hutchinson's Island anchorage It was a near thing, Toby, but she drifted free in time, thanks to you two "

"It was her doing—not mine " He could speak quite normally now—even shout, if he liked Somehow, it was comforting to play the invalid a moment more.

"Argue that out with Nancy," said Roy "She's bringing your supper in a moment "

He found that he could wait for that event with no emotion whatsoever. He had said all he could ever say in his letter; the whirlwind events of the afternoon merely added the stamp of reality to his capitulation Even if she gloats, he told himself, I can endure it now He must have dozed for a moment on that bit of bravado When he opened his eyes in earnest, and saw the familiar white silhouette above him, his heart was already thumping like a hammer.

"Broth first," said Nancy. "Broth—and a little tender chicken meat Roy says that must do for now. If you'll take it quietly, I'll add a glass of bordeaux "

"You needn't be a nursemaid," he murmured. "We've burned out the plague, along with the company profits And *I'm* as well as I'll ever be "

"Eat, Toby Don't say another word until you've eaten If you're strong enough, we'll have a small ceremony with that glass of wine "

He stared up at her blankly—puzzled by her tone, yet vaguely pleased that she had seated herself on the bed, to feed him as carefully as a mother with a balky child Somehow, he had never thought she would stoop to this Maum Bonnie, or any of the parlor wenches, could have done this chore as well.

"And now the bordeaux," said Nancy "Sit up and drink it yourself. You needn't pretend to be weak—in body or mind "

He held the chill white wine to the candlelight "You mentioned a ceremony, I believe What shall I say? The Company is dead—long live the Company?"

He looked up sharply at the sound—the screech of foolscap tearing Nancy was standing at the fireplace For a long moment she did not even stir, as though she enjoyed the tribute of his staring. Then she joined the torn pieces of the letter and ripped them once again

"It's the letter you sent me this afternoon, Toby. Forgive the symbolism, but it's highly necessary—when a man's head is as hard as yours "

He half-rose from his nest of pillows as she dropped the letter in the grate "You read it through, I hope?"

"You stubborn fool," said Nancy—and her voice had never been lighter "You double-distilled idiot! Couldn't you even realize that Roy would tell me everything about—about Martha? And the *Darby Belle*? And those suspicions you were too mulish to put into words?" And with that small outburst Nancy Gregory stood back to watch the flames lick the letter into ashes

"You're taking a great risk," he said. "That's your only evidence of my surrender."

"Oh no, it isn't, Toby You talked quite awhile before you regained consciousness Here, and aboard the *Lady Oglethorpe* I've several witnesses " The last bit of foolscap crumbled Nancy gave a short happy laugh In all their months of battling, he had never heard her laugh with quite that open heartiness

"Why must you force me to burn your first love letter? And why must we bang a ship's rudder against your skull before you'll ask me to marry you?"

Memory returned in a rush, then, along with the words

he had murmured in his dream He closed his eyes one more time, praying that dream and reality would never merge. But Nancy was still at the bedside when he looked again—and it was Nancy's fingers that closed about his own.

"Does that mean I'm—accepted?"

"Don't be a mule to the end, Toby. I accepted you the moment I jumped aboard that flatboat at Darbyville."

"Only in your heart—never in your mind."

"My heart was wiser Why did you keep yours closed for two long years? Can't you see that the Darby Company needs us both?"

"We aren't done with fighting, Nancy."

"What wedded couple is ever done with fighting?"

There was more he meant to say—much more. He lost the words against her lips, willingly enough Tomorrow, or the day after, would be time enough for argument.

THE END

"The opportunity to practice brotherhood presents itself every time you meet a human being."

—JANE WYMAN

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